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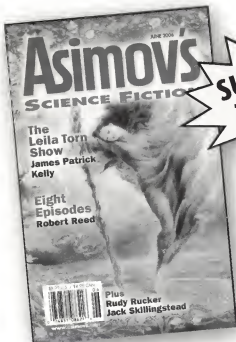
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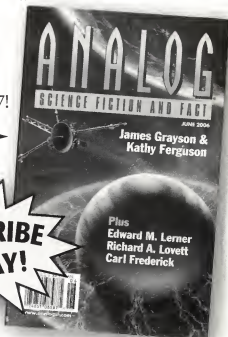
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
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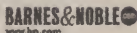
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MARCH 2007

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ALLI/TIP AND ME

One of the joys of working in the science fiction field has always been the opportunity to work with and to get to know the writers whose fiction I grew up on. I cannot exaggerate the excitement I felt the first day in the office when Isaac Asimov strolled in, or meeting Samuel R. Delany at a party, or joining Ursula K. Le Guin for lunch while she was on a book tour for *Always Coming Home*, or sending galleys of *I, Robot* to Harlan Ellison. It's hard to convey how intimidated I was the first time I had to call Robert Silverberg to congratulate him on his Nebula nomination for "Sailing to Byzantium" and to invite him to sit at the Asimov's banquet table. Later that day I had to make the same phone call to Roger Zelazny! One author that I never expected to have the chance to work with, and whom I never did meet in person, was the famously reclusive James Tiptree, Jr.

James Tiptree, Jr. had always been one of my favorite authors. As a teenager, I had no idea that there was a mystery about his identity. My first inkling that Tiptree might be an enigma occurred at the 1974 World Science Fiction Convention when I heard Harlan Ellison demand that the author come forward and accept his Hugo award in person. Tiptree, however, did not show up.

By the time I began working at Asimov's, everyone knew that both Tiptree and Raccoona Sheldon, an-

other award-winning writer, were pseudonyms for Alice B. Sheldon. One person who did meet this author was Shawna McCarthy. Charles Platt, who was conducting a series of interviews for his *Dreammaker* books, asked Shawna to accompany him to his meeting with Sheldon. This was Alice Sheldon's first-ever in-person interview. Shortly after Shawna became editor of Asimov's, we ran the interview in our April 1983 issue. I had no contact with Alli then, but I did work with her on the three stories that ran in the magazine from 1985-1987. One of these tales, "Collision" (May 1986), became part of the author's book, *The Starry Rift*, which was published by Tor in July of that year. By then, alli/Tip or Tip/alli, as she variously signed her notes, and I had corresponded by phone and letters several times.

This comfortable professional relationship lasted right up to her death in the spring of 1987. My memory of much of it, though, had been filed way back in my mind until biographer Julie Phillips asked me for an interview in March 2005. Julie is the author of the fascinating book, *James Tiptree, Jr.: The Double Life of Alice B. Sheldon*, which was the subject of two reviews in last month's issue.

In addition to the interview, I provided Julie with some of Alli's notes and letters. Julie felt that there was one letter in particular that showed how late in her life, this highly regarded author was

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still learning and attempting to improve her craft.

It's an interesting historical document, so I thought I'd make the letter available here:

5 Aug 86

Dear Sheila,

Your letter about updating my blurb is with me as I cower in my cabin in an endless rainstorm in the wild woods north of Anchorage, Alaska. (Actually it is a very comfortable cabin but I long for sun so that my "gringo friend" [her husband] can fish more comfortably.) Great country, but wet. We're on the Talachulitna River, which isn't on most maps, and outside of that, the only means of getting about is by moose trail. Mooses do not make level trails, so that any trip, say to the johnny at midnight, is a question of slide—crash—pick yourself-up & find-the-flash-light.

I have been so preoccupied and fascinated with the life here that I have no more idea what was in my previous blurb than a red squirrel, one of which is examining me thru the window. What *did* it say? As to writing, no novels since "Brightness Falls from the Air," just a bunch of shorts hither & yon. I think the one you're printing is "Yanqui Doodle," which indicates that I've been harking to the news with ever-increasing dread. (How that senile clown got into the White House is beyond me!) But all this is no good to you.

Maybe my writerly intentions are what you need. You could say I am bored by the

slow-pace and ultra-clear style I develop—effect of novel writing—and I intend to go back to some of my old short manner, where you hit running and accelerate from there. "Yanqui" isn't an example of this, it's more of an unknown artifact I picked up on the way home.

And oh, by the way, a lot of blurbs have taken to calling me a "clinical" psychologist, WHICH I AM NOT & NEVER WAS. A *research* psychologist, or an *experimental* psychologist, please. The point is that while I know a lot about the wiring of say, hamsters, I am no use to sick people. In the field of psychology there is a savage and perennial war between the two species. Us research types think of ourselves more in terms of science. Of course I'm retired from all that, but old loyalties stick.

Dear Sheila, can you extract anything of use from all this?

Warmest regards,

Tip/alli

By the time I wrote the blurb for the story, six months had passed. The fishing trip was old news, and, since we'd always referred to her as an experimental psychologist, there was nothing to correct. As a result, none of the information in the letter actually made it into the blurb, so I'm glad to have the opportunity to share it with you now.

Late in 1986, I decided to screw up my courage and ask Alli for a favor. If I sent her a self-addressed stamped envelope and a copy of the book, would she autograph *The Starry Rift* for me? When I received word that she would honor

my request, I packaged up the book and the envelope, but I left something out. I'm not sure what, but a whispered memory tells me it may have been a fan letter from a reader. I sent this "something" along on January 6, 1987, and casually mentioned that I had originally planned to include it in the book package. In early March I received a worried postcard. Alli had come across my vague letter and couldn't remember what I'd meant. "Please tell me," she wrote, "Did I ever autograph and return *Starry Rift*?" Well, I had the treasured book in hand, and, being a procrastinator, I didn't get back to her right away. One afternoon in May, I received a phone call from Alli. She was still concerned about the book and wanted to make certain I had received it. I finally assured her that she had autographed it and re-

turned it to me and thanked her for granting me this favor.

Alli's persistence at resolving this trivial mystery may have been a minor part of an attempt to clear out some papers and wrap up as many loose threads as possible at the end of her life. I was working at home a few days later when Gardner Dozois called to tell me that she had died by her own hand. We were all stunned by her loss. Isaac Asimov wrote a moving editorial about her, which ran in our January 1988 issue.

Although her death was saddening, I feel as though I know her much better now, after reading Julie's biography, than I ever did in life. Still, while my friendship with Alice Sheldon was neither long nor deep, it was a privilege to get to work with her during that period in the eighties. O

CAT SPACESUIT

How do you pat a cat in a pressurized container?
It judders against your glove.
You hold the little air-puffed mass,
Stiff against your insulated shoulder.

"Don't pish in the carrier," you say,
Wondering if the general sense of this
Will come through the suit radio
"It's a stinker to clean."

A disapproving meow comes back to your phones.
How long till the next patting,
And will the food be any good?

—Ruth Berman



JACK WILLIAMSON

The long, extraordinary life of Jack Williamson came to a peaceful end last November, six months short of his ninety-ninth birthday, at his home in the small university town of Portales, New Mexico. His career as a science fiction writer had begun in the by now almost mythical days more than seventy-five years ago when the great pioneer Hugo Gernsback was publishing *Amazing Stories*, and continued on, decade after decade, until just last year, when his final novel, *The Stonehenge Gate*, appeared. Throughout all that time Williamson was a major figure in the field, constantly evolving and growing, with the astonishing result that he was able to win both the Hugo and Nebula awards in his nineties.

Nineteen years ago I wrote the column that follows, by way of paying tribute to Jack's sixtieth anniversary as a published writer. I can think of no better tribute than to reprint it now:

This is the opening paragraph of a science fiction story that was published in 1928:

The Metal Man stands in a dark, dusty corner of the Tyburn College Museum. Just who is responsible for the figure being moved there, or why it was done, I do not know. To the casual eye it looks to be merely an ordinary life-size statue. The visitor who gives it

a closer view marvels at the minute perfection of the detail of hair and skin; at the silent tragedy in the set, determined expression and poise; and at the remarkable greenish cast of the metal of which it is composed, but, most of all at the peculiar mark upon its chest. It is a six-sided blot, of a deep crimson hue, with the surface oddly granular and strange wavering lines radiating from it—lines of a lighter shade of red.

And this is the beginning of a story published in 1947:

Underhill was walking home from the office, because his wife had the car, the afternoon he first met the new mechanicals. His feet were following his usual diagonal path across a weedy vacant block—his wife usually had the car—and his preoccupied mind was rejecting various impossible ways to meet his notes at the Two Rivers bank, when a new wall stopped him.

The wall wasn't any common brick or stone, but something sleek and bright and strange. Underhill stared up at a long new building. He felt vaguely annoyed and surprised at this glittering obstruction—it certainly hadn't been here last week.

The third story, which appeared in 1978, starts like this:

AVAILABLE MARCH



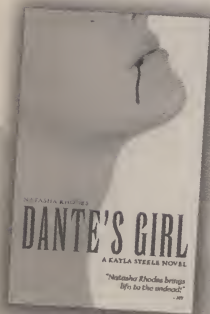
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The office intercom grunted. "Olaf?" It was Sakuma, head of Northcape Engineers. "Clients for you. A couple of motherworlders, pretty fresh to Medea. Want a research station built. I told 'em you could do it."

"Where?"

A silent second.

"Listen to 'em, anyhow," Sakuma said. "They're serious. Well funded. We've talked about the risks, and they're still determined. They want to see Farside—"

Much of the stylistic history of modern science fiction is encapsulated in these three excerpts. The first ("The Metal Man," *Amazing Stories*, December, 1928) starts in a clear, quiet way, undramatic but suggesting wonders to come: rather British in tone. The second ("With Folded Hands") exemplifies the slick, efficient style of the postwar *Astounding Science Fiction*, where it appeared in the July 1947 issue: strangeness dropped down in the commonplace world of bank loans and weedy lots. And the third ("Farside Station," written for Harlan Ellison's *Medea* anthology but first published in the November 1978 *Asimov's*) is very much up-to-date in manner, fast-paced and clipped.

Different as they are from one another, these lead paragraphs have two things in common. One is that they all get their stories moving quickly and encourage the reader to want to know what happens next. The other is that they were all written—over a fifty-year period—by Jack Williamson. Who is still at it today, a decade after his superb *Medea* story appeared, and whose sixtieth anniversary as a

science fiction writer we commemorate now.

Sixty years of first-class science fiction?

Consider that awhile. Calvin Coolidge was President of the United States when Williamson's first story was published. Isaac Asimov was not quite nine years old. Robert Sheckley and Philip K. Dick had just been born. Roger Zelazny, Harlan Ellison, Algis Budrys, and Robert Silverberg were all some years in the future. Radio was new; television was science fiction; movies were silent. And Jack Williamson—born in Arizona, not yet a state of the Union in 1908—had just sold his first story.

Simply to plug away writing publishable fiction for sixty years would itself be an extraordinary record of persistence, even if the work were only mediocre. But when the Science Fiction Writers of America gave Jack Williamson its Grand Master trophy in 1975—the second such award to be given, Robert A. Heinlein having received the first—he was not being honored merely for endurance. Over the decades Williamson has created an astonishing body of classic science fiction. What reader has ever forgotten the rollicking *Legion of Space*, first published more than fifty years ago? The powerful, brooding werewolf story, *Darker Than You Think*, of 1940? The chilling masterpiece of the robot takeover, "With Folded Hands," and its 1948 sequel, *The Humanoids*?

And so much more. The *Seetee* series, science fiction's first exploration of antimatter. The soaring, visionary *Starchild* books, written in collaboration with Frederik Pohl. The great adventure story *Golden Blood*. And then, too, *The Reign of*

Wizardry, The Power of Blackness, Manseed, Lifeburst—on and on and on. All of it written with vigor, power, constantly renewed inventiveness, and insight. His writing has grown with the years. His work is always fresh, always new, always at the forefront of the field. No one could possibly guess that the stories he will publish this year are the work of an eighty-year-old. In the late 1970s, at a time when most SF writers half his age were still clinging to their typewriters, Jack Williamson had already switched over to a word processor. He is the *youngest* sixty-year veteran anyone could imagine.

He doesn't *look* young, this tall, shy, gangling man who has spent his life under the Southwestern sun. You can see his years in the stoop of his shoulders now, and in the folds and creases of his skin. But you need only spend ten minutes talking with Jack Williamson to feel the youthful openness of his restless, inquiring mind and the re-

silience of his indomitable spirit. And you need only read a few lines of any of his sixty years of science fiction to know that you are in the presence of one of the world's great storytellers. It's been a privilege to know him and a delight to read him. He honors us by his presence in our midst.

I wrote the preceding paragraphs in 1988. They have to be put into past tense now, but except for the need for updating, everything still applies. Jack Williamson, a writer, critic, and teacher and a warm-hearted, loving, and beloved human being, who lived on with unending creativity and unimpaired intellect from the early years of the twentieth century to the early years of the twenty-first, seemingly as ageless as a sequoia, has turned out to be mortal after all. But the books and stories that he wrote will survive far into the future that he depicted with such splendid fertility of imagination. ○

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LETTERS

Dear Sheila,

Kristine Kathryn Rusch's essay, "Barbarian Confessions" (September 2006), was a breath of fresh air in the stale, mannered and claustrophobic halls of the SF world. In Britain, and probably in America, surrounded by critics disappearing up their own fundaments, self-proclaimed SF academics who think they rule the roost and deeply serious writers who are "political" and believe their opinions beyond fiction actually matter, we're still choking in rotting flotsam and jetsam cast up by a New Wave that retreated about forty years ago.

Like Kristine, I too abandon more new books than I read, rather confining my "work" reading to those written expressly for the purpose of conveying information. And I'm tired of the literati and the damage they do, the careers they wreck by convincing writers who have produced hated entertainment to now produce something serious, the self-important reviewers who put themselves above the books they review, the long turgid essays about the meaning of it all and the importance of obscure books of authorial masturbation, the older writers who think story and entertainment are beneath them, produce some worthy tome, then spend their declining careers whining to their publishers and agents about lack of sales, and the general sneering attitude towards anything that dares to be an easy enjoyable read.

Bring on the barbarians, I say. Let them kick over the crumbling statues, tear down the rotting curtains and smash all the windows to let in some light and air. Let them put to

the sword and throw into a pit all the grubby weasel-worshippers of bankrupt ideas about literature. I'll look down at their bloody corpses and dance.

Neal Asher
Essex,
United Kingdom

Dear Sheila,

I'm not sure which bookstores Kristine Rusch shops in. I mostly shop in a large Borders and a moderate-size Barnes and Noble. The SF sections in both are pretty much the ones she says we should have. There is an awful lot of what's best categorized as SF and fantasy adventure. There's also a lot that would have fit in well with the classic SF of the 1940s, 1950s, or 1960s—good solid stories with memorable characters. We've had a major blossoming of space opera, from writers like Vernor Vinge, Stephen Baxter, Alastair Reynolds, and David Brin, and military adventure from the likes of David Weber and David Drake. All these seem to be exactly what Rusch says we need. They are all entertaining and provide "good reads" (both of which she asks for in her essay). For every very "literary" book by Gene Wolfe or Kelly Link, there are dozens of adventure books by other writers. (This is of course not to say that writers like Vinge and Reynolds are not literarily ambitious. Like many great books, their novels are both well written and very entertaining.)

If the percentage of the total books sold that are SF is dropping, I don't think it's because of the lack of adventure stories or there being too

high a percentage of dystopias or "difficult-to-read" works.

I do agree with her on one point—the worries about tie-in books taking up shelf space—though I think for different reasons. When I was first starting to buy a lot of books, a lot of shelf space was taken up by Edgar Rice Burroughs, Perry Rhodan, and Conan. It's this niche that the tie-in novels seem to be filling. I don't think they are really taking much space away from non-tie-in books.

Jim Mann
McDonald, PA

Dear Editor,

Hooray for Kristine Kathryn Rusch! I do not read SF in order to become depressed or bored. I look for action and some evidence of the strength and goodness of the human race.

There is both good and bad space opera. Adult readers know the difference. Let's see even more high-quality space-opera stories in your magazine.

John Acomb
Beloit, WI

Dear Ms. Williams,

Although I started with science fiction at about the same time and age that Kristine Kathryn Rusch did, and enjoy both written and media SF (I'm an engineer today in some part due to Scotty), I think Ms. Rusch's article, "Barbarian Confessions," in September's issue is mistaken in the following ways.

First, the notion that hardcore fans and writers consider space opera and time travel to Hitler's Germany to be passé seems off the mark. Catherine Asaro writes unabashed space adventure stories and the SF writers elected her the president of SFWA; Allen Steele wrote a time-travel-to-Hitler's Germany story ("Where Angels Fear to Tread") in 1997—and the fans gave it a Hugo Award. And Jack

McDevitt, whose *Polaris* Ms. Rusch correctly calls a good old-fashioned SF novel, was nominated for the Nebula by his fellow writers many times, including for *Polaris*.

Second, concern that SF/fantasy sales are a tiny part of the overall fiction market overlooks the fact that a lot of science fiction is sold as romance (*The Time-Traveler's Wife* and the popular category of time-travel romance), mystery (the works of J.D. Robb (Nora Roberts' penname), or general fiction (*The Handmaid's Tale*, *The Plot Against America*, *Never Let Me Go*, etc.). The wide spread of science fictional ideas is to SF's credit; we don't hoard our tropes. That's why some movies that are clearly SF (*Gattaca*, *The Truman Show*, or *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*), but don't fit the mold of *Star Wars*, are not recognized as being SF.

Finally, I think Ms. Rusch's history of SF is incorrect. Dystopian SF did not arise as part of the New Wave of the 1960s but instead as part of the reaction to the Second World War, in the late 1940s and early 1950s. It was then, not later, when stories about infanticide, nuclear holocaust, and disturbing social trends run amuck became common. Strongly plotted non-dystopian SF remained available in the post New Wave, but pre-*Star Wars* 1970s (*The Mote in God's Eye* and *Tau Zero* are two examples from the awards lists) and remain easy to find today (in works by David Brin, Lois McMaster Bujold, Robert Sawyer, and Kristine Kathryn Rusch). When *Star Wars*, *Star Trek*, or some other dramatic presentation draws someone to the SF shelf, the sense of wonder will be there for him or her in the latest *Stargate* tie-in and in the latest book by Vernor Vinge, just as it was for me in *Rendezvous with Rama*.

Andrew Love
Columbia, MD

THE LIVING AND THE DEAD

the living dead

At the end of 2005, online short fiction publishing was dealt a double blow when **SCIFI.COM** <scifi.com> pulled the plug on **Ellen Datlow** <datlow.com> and **Sci Fiction** <scifi.com/scifiction> while **Eileen Gunn** <eileengunn.com> decided that she could no longer continue to publish **The Infinite Matrix** <infinitematrix.net>. Of course, just because they are no longer being updated doesn't mean that you can't still visit them. For the time being, the content is still available to all, although eventually the ghosts of both of these sites will fade away. In one of Eileen Gunn's farewell editorials—there were many, since her site has a strong streak of zombie in it and twitches briefly to life from time to time—she predicts that the *Infinite Matrix* will persist for about a year. Which means it may have disappeared by the time you read this.

Or maybe not—allow me to digress. I have in the past mentioned the **Internet Archive** <archive.org> and its marvelous Wayback Machine. If you know the URL of any defunct site, there's a good chance you can use the Wayback Machine to summon it back from the dead. The Internet Archive offers some fifty-five billion pages dating back to 1996 for your brows-

ing pleasure. Not everything is available, but, for example, long-time fans will recall that Ellen Datlow's previous two online editing gigs were the groundbreaking **OMNI Online** <www.omnimag.com> and **Event Horizon** <www.eventhorizon.com/sfzine/>. Typing either of their URLs into the Wayback Machine will get you . . . well, *something*. The sites are by no means intact, but there is a trove of material there for the taking, enough to give the Kopyright Kops nightmares. So just because a ghost site finally moves into the Great Beyond doesn't mean it's lost forever.

For almost six years, *Sci Fiction* was not only the premier online showcase for original SF, but it was also one of our genre's highest paying markets. Most of the SF community reacted as Gardner Dozois did when he wrote in his yearly summation of the state of the field that *Sci Fiction* was "killed by short-sighted corporate bean counters." The stories on *Sci Fiction* were often reprinted in *Bests of the Year* and several of them won awards. *Sci Fiction* itself took a Hugo for Best Website in 2005. Similarly, the *Infinite Matrix*'s mix of cutting edge fiction with an eclectic stable of columnists made it a must-click site. No one could question the artistic excellence of these fine webzines. So why are they ghosts?

SF webzine publishing is still in an experimental stage and no one has yet come up with a robust formula for success. It seems to me that a truly successful webzine will have to stand on three legs. First, it will have to deliver content to readers at a price they will pay. The challenge here is that the price most readers are comfortable with is *free*. Second, it will have to pay its contributors. The challenge here is balancing the equation between income and outgo, since in general, the more the pay, the better the contributions, and the more readers. Third, it will have to pay or otherwise satisfy its staff and offer its owners some return on investment. The challenge here is to define *otherwise satisfy* and *some*. I have no inside information on the demise of the *Infinite Matrix* or *Sci Fiction*, other than to note that they gave content away and they paid professional rates. I have to believe it was the third leg that gave way.

living well

Now that the *Infinite Matrix* and *Sci Fiction* are no longer updating, **Strange Horizons** <strangehorizons.com> is clearly the alpha SF webzine. It updates weekly—daily for reviews—with a pleasing mix of fiction, poetry, interviews, opinion, and art. Stories from *Strange Horizons* now regularly appear on awards ballots and the tables of contents of Year's Bests. The zine has published a clutch of **Rhysling Award** <sfpoetry.com/rhysling.html> winners, given every year by the **Science Fiction Poetry Association** <sfpoetry.com>. I have been a fan of *Strange*

Horizons since its debut in 2000. One of the secrets of its success, I think, is that it did not arrive on the scene fully formed, but rather grew into its current estimable state.

There is no charge to read *Strange Horizons* and they pay professional rates—not quite the lofty sums that we earn here at *Asimov's*, but none the less respectable. Thus it stands squarely on two of the three necessary legs. But the folks who bring you this particular webzine have constructed a unique third leg. For one thing, *Strange Horizons* has an all-volunteer staff. Nobody gets paid. I confess when this was first explained to me in the early days by **Mary Anne Mohanraj** <mamohanraj.com> and **Jed Hartman** <kith.org/logos> I was skeptical. *Good luck with the burnout*, is what I thought, but didn't say. I was wrong. According to the masthead, there are upward of thirty dedicated staffers working today to bring you *Strange Horizons*. There has been some turnover over the years, most notably in that Mary Anne has moved on and the dynamic **Susan Marie Groppi** <sugarspun.net> is now editor-in-chief, but there is continuity as well. The satisfaction of the SH crew must come from knowing that they've created one of the most indispensable SF sites anywhere—a showcase for new and emerging talent. Another key to its success is that it has received 501(c)(3) tax-exempt status from the U.S. Internal Revenue Service. That means that readers and other supporters can make tax deductible donations to *Strange Horizons* during their fundraisers. And if you've ever been to the site, you've seen that these folks are savvy about raising funds! So in a sense, the

readers *do* pay for this webzine, even though they aren't charged for it. It's a system that has worked well for six years and here's hoping it continues to work for the next sixty.

newborn

Meanwhile three new webzines have debuted.

Actually, **Orson Scott Card's Intergalactic Medicine Show** <intergalacticmedicineshow.com> began just before the demise of the *Infinite Matrix* and *Sci Fiction*, with its first issue in October of 2005. Since then it has published just one more issue, but release of a third is imminent as I type this. **Orson Scott Card** <hatrack.com> serves as Publisher and Executive Editor and **Edmund R. Schubert** <edmundrschubert.com> is Editor. In order to read the fiction in the *Intergalactic Medicine Show*, you will have to register and pay \$2.50 an issue—a fair price, sez me. Many of the contributors to the *Intergalactic Medicine Show* are newer writers like **Brad Beaulieu** <quillings.com> and **Scott D. Danielson** <scottddanielson.blogspot.com>, although there are some old pros like my pal from our **Clarion** <theclarionfoundation.org> days together, **Al Sarrantonio** <alsarrantonio.com>. But clearly the big draw here is the promise of a new Ender's World story by Scott Card in every issue. Also, there is more to the *Intergalactic Medicine Show* than stories. All the lively non-fiction, reviews, columns, and the like are free to read any time.

Jim Baen's Universe <baens-universe.com> is a bold experi-

ment from one of the boldest minds in publishing. The first issue had a stellar table of contents, featuring stars like **Gregory Benford** <gregorybenford.com>, **Charles Stross** <antipope.org/Charlie>, **John Barnes** <[en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Barnes_\(author\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Barnes_(author))>, **Elizabeth Bear** <elizabethbear.com>, and **Gene Wolfe** <mysite.verizon.net/~vze2tmhh/wolfe.html>, to name but a few. And it's not surprising that top talent flocked to *Jim Baen's Universe*, since it's the highest paying market in the genre, with rates *several times* the lofty sum we make here at *Asimov's*. But in order to read these folks, you're going to have to fork over thirty dollars for six issues a year. Each is promised to have a huge dollop of over a hundred and fifty thousand downloadable words. Will readers pay for online fiction? Will the experiment succeed? It's clearly too soon to tell, and prospects have gotten slightly murky with the untimely death of Jim Baen shortly after the launch in June of 2006. (Another—briefer—digression: Jim Baen bought my first story. Our paths diverged thereafter, but if he hadn't fished me out of the slush, someone else would be writing this column today. I've thanked him several times over the years both in public and private, but here's a last one with feeling. Thanks, Jim!) But *Jim Baen's Universe* is in the capable hands of **Eric Flint** <ericflint.net>, himself an old hand at digital publishing from his work as editor of **The Baen Free Library** <baen.com/library>. For my money, this is *the* site to watch in the coming year, both for the quality of the fiction and the success of the business model.

Helix <helixsf.com> bills itself as a speculative fiction quarterly. Just one issue has come out since its launch in July of 2006, but it clearly is well designed and well thought out. It is the brainchild of **William Sanders** <sff.net/people/sanders>, who bills himself as Senior Editor and Mean Old Bastard Emeritus, and **Lawrence Watt-Evans** <watt-evans.com>, self-styled Managing Editor and Freelance Pedant; they are supported by a good sized staff for a quarterly webzine. Editors Watt-Evans and Sanders are attempting to produce *Helix* as a "labor of love" and support it through donations. Their webzine pays professional rates and is free to read. One of their goals is to publish stories which are edgy and controversial. The first issue has good stories by **Beth Bernobich** <sff.net/people/beth-bernobich>, **Adam Troy-Castro** <sff.net/people/adam-troy> and **Richard Bowes** <rickbowes.com>, among others, along with columns on alternate history and Mars in science fiction.

exit

I gave Eileen Gunn and Ellen Datlow a peek at the first section of this column and Ellen wrote back

to say that I should consider advertising as a potential business model. It's certainly clear that ads are what have made **Google** <google.com> the juggernaut that it is today. Has anyone figured out how to make ads pay for quality science fiction? Not yet, but ad revenue has been steadily migrating from broadcast and print media to the net ever since the turn of the century. If SF webzines can make the case that they can deliver motivated eyes to online ads, there may soon be a fourth leg to support online publishing (except I really, really hate this whole leg metaphor now and I'm sorry I brought it up in the first place).

Eileen wrote to say that, although, after the first few years, the *Infinite Matrix* was forced to cut payment rates, which had originally been competitive with *Sci Fiction*, she found that authors were actually interested in more than just the paycheck. The chance to publish edgy work without censorship, to have the work available to a large potential audience, and to see their work in a venue with other significant content, meant almost as much to them as money.

I take her point about this career choice, especially when the writer gets to work with editors like Ellen Datlow and Eileen Gunn. ○

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Mary Rosenblum has published SF novels and short stories since 1990. She has been a Hugo nominee and a winner of the Compton Crook Award. Mary lives and writes on country acreage where she also trains dogs. Her novels, *Horizons* from Tor Books and *Water Rites* from Fairwood Press, were released this past year. You can find out more about her books at her website www.maryrosenblum.com. In her new tale for us, she shows us what it might be like to direct space traffic while experiencing the . . .

BREEZE FROM THE STARS

Mary Rosenblum

Everybody in the graduating class went to The Hole where the working jocks hung out, up high near the hub on the NYUp orbital to celebrate . . . or gripe . . . when the rock jock postings went up. Sanya and Jorge got drunk fast, they had no tolerance to anything, and were already hooting and pushing each other around in the near-micro-g of the tiny bar. They'd been posted as new members of NYUp's elite Team One. Well, they had the reflexes of rock jocks, all right. But so did he. Jeri huddled back in the shadows, nursing a beer flavored with raspberries from the hub gardens. Up this high, where no tourists wandered, the walls were curved, no corners, and if you pushed a bit, you could bounce off the ceiling in the marginal gravity. The beer seemed to rise up into his head instead of going down and he felt drunk even after just half a bag. Not giddy, just a little disconnected from reality.

He sure wasn't celebrating. Wasn't sure why the hell he'd come. Jeri sucked another mouthful of bitter raspberry brew from the bag.

"Your face says *washed out*." A tall rock jock with tawny skin and a lot of fiber light tattoo-work drifted over. "But the wash-outs do their cryin' over in the Blue Moon." She put a decorated arm over his shoulder, breathed beer in his face. "What happened? You get posted to New Singapore and you hate Islam?"

He thought about shoving her arm off, didn't. Each tattoo meant a hit. He studied an emerald green Celtic knot, wondering what it meant. She

might have taken out a piece of junk . . . a floater, a danger to the orbital platforms or the traffic between. It might have been a rock coming in. Might have been a pirate raider carrying serious hardware. Rock jocks whacked whatever the dispatchers sent 'em to.

"I could take your mind off your bad post. Hey, you'll feel better when you're out hottin' after a rock anyway."

"Yeah." He didn't look at her. "Only they stuck me with a dispatch dock. Why? I had the best hit record in our class."

"Dispatch?" The arm withdrew. "They don't train jocks and put 'em on the cans to dispatch."

"Good." He drained the last of his beer. "Go tell Delfinio that, will you?"

"Delfinio? *That* Dispatch." Her tone capitalized it and made him look up, finally. She was nodding.

"When's your birthday, kid?"

"Huh?"

"Let me guess . . . somewhere between November 30 and December 17, right?"

"Yeah. December 5, so what?" He stared at her, waiting for the punch line.

"You're an Ophiuchus. Like a Cancer or Aries, you know? The woo-woo zodiac thing. Only it's some weird thirteenth house."

He didn't get it, kept his face still, not gonna help her to trip him into the punch line. Stupid coming here tonight. Should have just gone to the dorm and to bed. Oh, get it over with. He sighed. "That isn't one of the Zodiac signs," he said. "I'm a Sagittarius. As if it mattered."

"Oh, it's a sign all right. And it matters." The jock winked at him. "To Delfinio at least. That's why he picked you. He has this thing about Ophiuchus and people who are born in that sign. But look at it this way, Delfinio is Dispatch. The crews on the platforms just play backup. You're at the center of the universe, bro. Del's got eyes all over his bod . . . never misses a molecule." Her eyes narrowed and she looked past his shoulder. "Speak of the devil." She chuckled, slapped him on the shoulder so that he nearly flew out of the hammock seat. "Keep your pants on, honey." And wove her way through the crowded bar with the gliding grace of a native upsider who had never set foot on Earth.

He looked where she had looked, saw people in the bar move, give space, the way you only saw it when someone big walked the hallways in the orbital platforms. This little, skinny gnome with a naked skull, a micro-g body, and the big eyes and narrow face that said he had some Gypsy genes in him walked into that space. The Gypsies weren't quite human . . . so the talk said . . . and the look made him old, because the Gypsies had left for the Oort in the Departure, years ago. He glided through the empty, respectful space, ignoring the murmured greetings, came right up to Jeri. Looked him straight in the face.

"Jeri Annunciato-Sontag?" His voice was high and reedy.

"Yeah." Everyone was staring at them. "That's me."

"Let's go." The gnome twitched one narrow shoulder. "Save the cities the cost of a shuttle lift out to your post tomorrow." He looked at the empty beer bag in Jeri's hand. "Unless you need to get drunker first?"

Jeri spotted the rock jock with the light tattoos grinning from the edge of the crowd. Bowed in her direction. "Sure, Delfinio," he said and sailed the empty beer bag toward the bar. "Why not? Let's get to work."

"Oh, too soon yet." A wide grin stretched Delfinio's face. "But we can go home now. Work when you know your butt from a black hole."

Jeri followed him out of The Hole. He felt as if he pushed through an invisible skin that sealed behind him, shutting him out of the warm, close world of Sanya, Jorge, and the other jocks he'd trained with. The rock jock—he'd already forgotten her name—winked. But she was on the other side of that skin, too. He didn't return it.

Delfinio shuttled them over to Dispatch in a slightly larger version of a jock pod, an egg with the spiderweb harness designed to keep you intact no matter what your pod was doing. Jeri had already had the navigation-interface implanted, way back when he passed into the program, so when Delfinio passworded them into the system, the hull vanished and Jeri found himself floating in vacuum, facing the blue-white disc of Earth. Even after all his training flights, the sight always brought a rush of awe clear up from his toes to choke him for an instant. The slowly spinning can that was Dragon Home caught the sunlight along the planet's far perimeter, spangled with lights and buzzing with traffic. Not far from the orbital platform, the gleaming ribbon of the Elevator shimmered like a silver thread rising up from the planet's blue surface, the terminal like a jeweled bead at the end.

I was going to spend my life out here, Jeri thought and another wave of resentment rolled through him. Now he was going to spend it inside a can, sending his former buddies out to chase rocks and pirates. So what if Delfinio was the primo dispatcher. This was still a dispatch job.

"You didn't intend to become Dispatch," Delfinio agreed as the pod accelerated and the webbing tightened around Jeri's body. Like the jock, he capitalized the word. "No fun chases. No hunt and capture. No shoot 'em up." Delfinio cackled.

Great, a mind reader. Jeri wondered if Delfinio was a high-number empath. That's all he needed . . . get shut up in a can with someone who could read his every emotional shift. But if Delfinio overheard that, he didn't say anything about it.

It didn't take long to reach Dispatch. An even larger version of the egg-shaped jock pods, its matte black hull emerged suddenly from the star-sprinkled space between cans. The pod docked like silk, not a jar as it merged with the smart-alloy hull of Dispatch. A whisper of breeze told Jeri that the atmospheres were one. He didn't need that whisper. He smelled . . . well . . . living space. Delfinio freed himself from his web with a single, fluid motion, kicked off, and arrowed through the port that had opened in the joined hulls. Jeri untangled himself and pushed after, feeling clumsy and slow compared to Delfinio's fluid moves.

Dispatch didn't offer much. He hung up on the port and surveyed. Curved hull walls of off-white immediately bored him. Controls and decorations would be in virtual and he didn't have the password yet. A grav-gym occupied space and he counted two privacy closets that he could just

about bet on would contain a simple micro-g hammock, the kind you'd sleep in if you rode a miner out in the 'roid belt. "There's nothing here." He didn't try to hide his surprise. "This is central dispatch, right? I mean, if you're processing all the input, sending it out to the platform dispatchers, where are the others?"

Delfinio hovered in front of a section of curved hull without answering. Jeri recognized a kitchen wall . . . drink dispensers, meal oven . . . the whole works.

"You want to eat?" Delfinio didn't look at him. "Or you want more to drink? You can get plastered tonight." He turned and bared his teeth at Jeri. "Not after tonight. But I think you will not wish to, eventually."

"I'm not hungry." Jeri pushed off too hard, arrowed across the space, rebounded from the hull beside the kitchen wall, managed to spill his momentum with a somersault. None of this made sense. "I want to know what this is and why the hell I'm here."

"Do you believe in Hell?" Delfinio sounded genuinely curious. He pushed away from the kitchen wall, a tube of gelatinous, pale goo in his hands. He sucked from it. "Gym you saw when you came in, you sleep in this space." He touched open one of the closets, nodded at the micro-g hammock Jeri had expected. "The rest of your question you will answer yourself. So what Hell do you believe in?" He looked expectant. Like a pet waiting for a treat.

This was *Dispatch*? Jeri stared at the crazy old man for a moment. Couldn't be. "What about my birthday? Does that matter?"

"Oh, he's a smart one." Without seeming to move a muscle, Delfinio somersaulted slowly and precisely in place. "I saw Zai talking to you. She told you."

"No, she didn't." Jeri looked around the floating closet, his mind full of stars and vacuum and the blue-white loom of Earth. Lost to him. "She just said it mattered. What the hell has my birthday got to do with my ending up here?"

"It is never wise to invoke something that you do not wish to experience." Delfinio blinked slowly. "As to your birthday, you were born up here on NYUp platform. In the sign of Ophiuchus."

"What has that got to do with anything? And I never heard of that zodiac sign and I mean who cares, anyway?" He stared at the slack hammock. "I had the best hit record in the class."

"Anyone can hit a rock." Delfinio somersaulted again, unmoving, violating a whole lot more laws of physics. "Seeing what is out there to hit is talent. Go to bed," he said. "Go to sleep and dream."

"Dream of what?" Jeri said, but he muttered it under his breath and Delfinio didn't answer.

Instead, he gave Jeri a password that allowed him to decorate the Dispatch walls to his taste and to see the control fields, although Delfinio told him he was locked out until he learned how to use them.

Jeri thought about landscapes to paint on the walls of the pod. Settled for a view of Earth, with the New York Up platform visible, and the glittering thread of the Elevator. Just to remind himself of what he wasn't doing. He wondered if Delfinio knew what he had chosen, had a feeling that the old gnome did, but if so, he made no comment. Delfinio finished

his goo and then floated silently in the center of the space, his eyes glazed, curled into a loose fetal position.

Checking sensors? Watching for hazards so he could send the jocks out? It sure didn't look like he was doing much of anything.

Jeri went to bed, even though the raspberry beer buzzed in his blood and he wasn't really sleepy.

He didn't dream . . . not really. But at some point he woke to the soft darkness of his hammock with the sense that he had been listening to a murmured conversation. Delfinio, he thought, talking to himself. Almost before he could think this, he slid back into slumber and didn't wake again until the light in his hammock increased slowly and the sound of music woke him.

"Did you sleep well?" Delfinio floated near the kitchen wall, eating cubes of flavored tofu. He was upside down to Jeri's orientation, silhouetted by the Earthscape with which Jeri had decorated the hull. Jeri didn't change his position as he touched himself a squeeze of black tea from the wall. Let Delfinio change *his* orientation. He waited for Delfinio to ask him if he had dreamed, but instead, the old gnome simply went on eating, popping the pale cubes of soy curd into his mouth, chewing and swallowing without spilling a molecule.

Jeri sucked hot tea, sighed, and toed off the wall, torquing himself into a matching orientation with Delfinio. "I didn't dream," he said.

"Today, you get to surf the sensors with me." Delfinio's eyes crinkled. "You will dissolve. You will cease to exist and for a time . . . it will be hard. But I will put you back together. And then you will begin to comprehend Dispatch."

Jeri drew a deep breath. "Look, I know I've been . . . angry about being here. I guess I still am. And I don't understand anything. What makes this so special when all four platforms have twenty-four-seven crews watching the sensors?" He drew another breath, saw not one flicker of response in Delfinio's pale eyes. "Would you explain about the zodiac thing? If I was supposed to dream something last night . . . I didn't. So maybe you have the wrong person."

Without warning, without seeming to move a muscle, Delfinio drifted suddenly close. Jeri couldn't quite control his flinch and it set him drifting slowly toward the wall. He flushed as Delfinio followed, a few centimeters separating them, so close that he felt the heat radiating from Delfinio's flesh.

"You felt it." Delfinio drifted suddenly away, so that the space between them opened to a comfortable gap. "You are the right choice." His smile broadened, transforming his face. His eyes sparkled and Jeri had the sudden feeling that he was looking through twin windows into the sky of another world. Then Delfinio somersaulted, caught the kitchen wall, and looked over his shoulder at Jeri with a wink. "Breakfast," he said. "You will need it. What do you want to eat? I will tell you about the zodiac and your birth as you eat." Without waiting for Jeri's answer, he touched a tray of fruit and a hi-protein bagel from the wall, sailed it neatly to Jeri.

"Ophiuchus is a constellation," Delfinio began as Jeri popped the lid on

the tray. "It is called the Serpent Bearer and is not part of the zodiac. You know why?" Delfinio's body seemed to rotate around his head until he was oriented at right angles to Jeri. "Back when the Babylonians invented the zodiac more than 3000 years ago, the sun passed through only twelve constellations . . . the zodiac everyone knows." He cackled, drifting gently until he faced Jeri upside down. "But the precession of the Earth makes it appear that the sun now passes through thirteen houses. And the thirteenth, the one you were born into...is Ophiuchus."

"So what?" Jeri picked the fat green grapes from the tray, one by one. Someone had told him that on Earth, grapes grew only the size of his thumb. Puny. "Who cares about zodiac signs? That's like magic . . . fortune tellers, you know? And it's downsider stuff anyway." He popped another grape into his mouth, swallowed. "I mean, maybe it makes a good pickup line downside, but not up here."

"It made a good pickup line for you." Delfinio's eyes twinkled at Jeri's scowl. "But it is not about magic . . . or perhaps it is, depending on how you look at it." He snatched a grape from Jeri's tray, sucked it from his palm and swallowed. "Now . . . in a small window of time in the first part of December . . . an interstellar wind sweeps over us, a helium wind flowing into the solar system from the direction of Ophiuchus. The sun's gravity and spiraling magnetic field focuses the material into a cone and Earth passes through it during the first weeks of December. We're inside the cone now." He smiled. "It flows over us . . . the debris from the birth of stars." His pale eyes bored into Jeri's. "That is why I chose you now. It is easier for you to hear its voice."

"I . . . didn't hear any voice." Jeri clutched the tray as if it might blast off. "I told you. I didn't dream."

"You heard it last night and you heard it as you evolved from fish to monkey in the ancient sea of your mother's womb." Delfinio nodded and helped himself to another grape. "It changed you, that voice, and now you will listen to it again and learn to hear it forever. And learn to see. You will be good at this," he said, and pivoted, drifting gently away. "Finish your breakfast. I am going to exhaust you today."

As soon as Jeri finished the bagel and the last of the grapes, Delfinio passworded him into Dispatch.

"Don't worry," Delfinio said as the walls shimmered and warped around Jeri. "You cannot make any mistakes. You can only watch and begin to process." He snickered. "There will be a quiz."

About time to see the sensor controls, Jeri thought. Then, the walls of Dispatch vanished and . . .

. . . he dissolved.

A million simultaneous images crashed into his brain and he simply vanished into them. In a microsecond, he *was* NYUp, Dragon Home, New Singapore, Euro Two, black cans spinning, spangled with light, ship traffic, spilled garbage and lost tools, rocks caught in Sol's grip, dust, jock pods, shuttles . . .

He gasped, struggled to process, dizzy, his stomach clamping down on the grapes and chewed bread. Too many . . . the images blurred together and he seemed to spin down into chaos.

Relax. Delfinio's voice in his ear. Don't try. You must dissolve. I will not let you get lost.

Words didn't make any sense . . . Jeri sucked in breaths . . . one, two, three . . . all time suspended.

Relax. Don't look. Listen. Let the images themselves tell you what they are.

Hand touching him. Warm. Comforting. Jeri focused on that one, tangible sense and his breathing steadied. Don't look, he thought. How do you do that? He remembered a game he'd played with his best friend, Aimee, back when he was little. You looked at special pictures . . . blurry dots. And if you relaxed your eyes just right . . . a picture emerged.

He tried it. Relax. Relax your eyes, your mind, don't try to find any patterns, let go. He wasn't sure if he was thinking this or someone was telling him . . . Delfinio? For a long time nothing happened, then, in an instant . . . it changed.

He saw the picture.

Just for a second. Just a glimpse. He was looking everywhere, all at once, in all directions, seeing *everything*. All at once. Then it all dissolved into chaos again.

"Very good." Delfinio's voice sounded in his ear. "I told you. You would see it. I told you. You are the right one."

Jeri blinked, struggling to focus. Delfinio's face filled his vision, bright with triumph, close enough to kiss. He shoved away, automatic reaction, and they drifted apart, Delfinio giggling. The hull slapped his back, and he rebounded before he could grab for an anchor, his reflexes slow. "What happened?" he mumbled, his tongue thick, feeling as if he had been drugged.

"It's all right. It takes some time for the neural pathways to adjust. It interferes with speech for a short time."

"What interferes?" Fear flooded him.

"Do you know what Dispatch is?" Delfinio pushed off, did one of his utterly precise halts in front of Jeri. "Do you understand what just happened?"

Jeri shook his head no, not trusting his voice.

Delfinio floated in front of him, his pale eyes full of . . . compassion. "We have a thousand thousand AI eyes out there, from the asteroid belt inward. To look for rocks falling, for the dropped tool, the bit of broken rubble that will hole a platform or destroy a shuttle. The eyes look for pirates, illegal shuttles. A million eyes. How do you think Dispatch works?" Delfinio's voice was gentle.

"A . . . a program. Looks at all the images. You . . . send out the jocks."

"No." Delfinio cupped Jeri's face between his palms. "That is what the platform dispatcher teams rely on, but they are too slow. No. You have to see what *needs seeing*. A computer . . . the best AI . . . is too slow. It must look at everything. I . . . you . . . do not need to. As you learn, you will begin to see only what needs seeing."

Jeri moved his head in a short arc of disbelief.

"And that is why my pickup line was Ophiuchus." Delfinio smiled. "Because the breeze from the stars has to touch you at the right time in your mother's womb before you can see what needs seeing. Before you can see with the eyes of the universe." He looked sad, suddenly. "It does not touch all its children in the same way."

None of this made any sense and Jeri concentrated on not throwing up and totally disgracing himself.

"It is overwhelming . . . the first few times." Delfinio's hands were on him again, pushing him gently. "You will find it easier with practice. Sleep now. You have done enough today. You have dissolved. Now we will begin to put you back together. This has been a good first lesson."

Webbing brushed his face. His hammock. Delfinio webbed him in and his hands were gentle and too familiar and Jeri didn't much care. He had never felt this drained in his life, fell instantly into sleep. Later he woke to Delfinio's hands again, this time holding a packet of juice to his lips. He drank it, tasted things in it that weren't juice, and went back to sleep. In his dreams he chased after bits of junk that zipped around as if under power, trying to rip holes in the platforms. And all the time he chased them, he felt . . . attention.

As if he was not alone.

Time passed in a blur of exhaustion that never got any better. Jeri woke to Delfinio's face, hating him as he forced Jeri to down food that he didn't taste, then passworded him in, dissolving him again and again in a universe so vast that sometimes he thought that he had ceased to exist. Emerging, spent, he ate what Delfinio placed in his hands, slept, dreamed, and woke to do it all again.

Each time . . . he *saw* more easily. Each time he saw . . . less.

He stopped seeing everything all at once. In glimpses at first, then more and more often, the overwhelming images faded away and he saw only the threats. Junk. Rocks. Once, a ship slipping like a predator between the shadows of the platform cans where a ship did not belong. He sent out the jocks, that time, with Delfinio's supervision. He didn't dream at night anymore, simply slept.

And then, one morning, when he passworded in . . . it worked.

He saw it. All of it. From the outer edges of Near Earth Orbit inward, as familiar as his family's apartment growing up on NYUp, as familiar as Delfinio's face. The little rocks drifting inward stuck out like strangers. Without thinking he pointed at one that was about to cross into a shipping lane. "Singapore Six," he said because they were closest and it was their turn up in the rotation of rock jock teams.

Gotcha, Six's dispatcher murmured over Jeri's implanted com link. *On our way, Dispatch.*

Jeri startled.

Because it had been . . . like breathing. He hadn't once thought about what he was doing. And Six's dispatcher had responded to his point as it showed up on their direct link. Six had called him "Dispatch."

Delfinio wasn't passworded in. Jeri realized it and quickly passworded out. No Delfinio. He had vanished. Panic . . . totally illogical panic 'cause where could he go? . . . speared him. Jeri pushed off, somersaulted off the hull beside Delfinio's privacy closet, and slapped a palm against the lock plate. The hull cleared and there he was, webbed into his hammock. Asleep. Holographic letters glowed in a rich, plum purple in the air beside him.

It is a big job for one. The platform dispatchers cannot see it all, so it has been a long time since I have merely slept. It is your shift. We will celebrate when I wake. Congratulations, Dispatch.

Jeri toed himself back from the doorway and the hull opaqued behind him. One alone. He thought about that as he passworded himself back into the system, skimmed the universe of Near Earth Orbit easily, effortlessly, thoroughly. Felt a ghostly shimmer through his flesh, as if a breeze passed through his cells, unhampered.

"What are you?" he whispered. "What am I?"

Felt that breeze, but no answer.

He did the shift and it was a long one. He passworded out to pee, to drink some juice, to eat something. But always, even when he was out, the images hung just inside his consciousness, a ghostly overlay on the walls of reality that he skimmed with the part of his mind that wasn't busy eating, or peeing, or drinking juice.

And he wondered how long Delfinio had lived like this.

An eternity later, Delfinio reappeared, his eyes gleaming, chuckling to himself as he selected a huge meal from the kitchen wall. "You'll have to learn to stop listening now," he told Jeri as he sucked at a pint of guava juice. "When you need to sleep. It will take you some time, but there are two of us now. We will take turns."

"I hope I can do it." Jeri drifted, his head full of the ghostly presence of the Near Earth universe. "Delfinio . . . what is it? What am I feeling?"

"The voice of the universe?" Delfinio rotated slowly in place. "I'm not laughing at you. I don't know either." He sucked the last drops of guava from the bag, sailed it into the recycle slot. "You will feel it most strongly when the Earth's magnetic field funnels the helium wind down through the gravity well. So perhaps it is helium atoms speaking?" He took a big bite from a curried tofu slab without losing a crumb. "But it has changed you, that wind or voice. Forever." Upside down to Jeri's orientation he wagged a finger at him. "You will always *see*. You will always *know*. You have heard that whisper of the universe since your cells began to divide, but you did not know how to listen or to see. Now, you know."

Jeri closed his eyes, trying to banish the ghostly glimmer of Near Earth. "There's a bunch of junk . . . nearly inside the . . ."

"I got it," Delfinio said with his mouth full. Lost tawny crumbs of curried tofu, made a face. "I'll send Dragon Home's crew out in a moment. It's not really going to be a threat for another seventeen minutes. I'm on shift now. Tell yourself that. Really *know* it and let go." Deftly, he snatched crumb after tiny, drifting crumb from the air, sucking them from his fingertips. "You are very tired. I have exhausted you for four weeks now."

Had it been that long? Blearily, Jeri tried to count days, but they blurred into a haze of sleeping and trying to sort through images. "It's going to be like this forever?"

"Yes." Delfinio tossed the empty tofu wrapper into recycle, did one of his impossible rotations until he faced Jeri on the same orientation. He put his hands on Jeri's shoulders, gently, ignoring Jeri's flinch. "It is not always a burden. Look," he said softly. "Not for the junk. Look . . . outward."

"What do you mean?" Jeri blinked at him, wanting to push away from

those long fingers on his shoulders. "We don't have sensors out beyond Near Earth."

"You don't understand yet." Delfinio smiled at him gently, softly, lovingly. "Just . . . look. Look for Saturn. Look past Saturn. You're not looking for junk. Just *look*."

Jeri looked. It was like breathing now . . . *look*.

"No." Delfinio sounded exasperated. "Stop looking *at* and just *look*."

Which made no sense. But Delfinio had said Saturn and he knew where it was. So he looked, remembered how it was when Delfinio first passworded him in to dissolve, didn't *try* to see, just looked *out* and waited to see what happened.

Nothing.

Nothing.

And then . . .

. . . the universe opened like a flower unfurling. Stars, galaxies, planets whizzed past, with glimpses of brown/white/gray/green/blue. He was falling into forever, heard someone yell, realized dimly it was his voice, felt Delfinio's arms around him.

"Look, just look," Delfinio breathed in his ear. "You're not lost, you're right here."

He saw . . . forever.

"Come back now. That's enough."

Jeri blinked, his stomach curling with loss, cramped walls curved around him. Dumb, he stared into Delfinio's eyes. Not windows into an alien sky, no. Windows into forever.

"It is not always a burden . . . finding the trash." Delfinio kissed him gently on the forehead. "You get to truly see."

"I saw . . . worlds," he whispered. "Blue. That's water, right?"

"I don't know." Delfinio grinned, showing all his teeth. "I've never looked that close. Why?" His shrug didn't move him one centimeter. "I can't go there. You can look close if you want."

He had seen worlds, infinite universes. He thought of the blue and white planets, the green and tawny ones. Flinched as Delfinio touched him.

"It's like getting drunk," Delfinio said softly. "Only *sometimes*. Only when you're not looking for junk." Darkness threaded his words . . . no . . . it was sadness. "Or you really will dissolve. It will suck out your soul and leave nothing behind."

And Jeri shivered, hearing a reason why Delfinio looked for junk alone.

"I think you will be fine." Delfinio grinned again, pushed him so that Jeri drifted toward the little shuttle lock. "Take the shuttle and go back to The Hole. You did not really celebrate your graduation and you should do that. You do not need to pay. They will never let you pay, now." His grin widened. "Set the shuttle on auto and it will bring you home safely."

Home. Jeri looked around the small ovoid of Dispatch. Looked back at Delfinio. "Thanks," he said and hesitated, because he had been about to refuse. "Yeah, I'll go."

"Go get drunk. Find Zai. She had her eye on you." Delfinio cackled. "When you're all done, it's my turn. It has been a long time since I have drunk bitter beer at The Hole."

"What happened to your last trainee?" Jeri paused outside the shuttle. "Or am I the first?"

"Oh, not the first." Delfinio looked away.

When it became clear he wasn't going to say more, Jeri left.

It was as Delfinio said. He pushed into The Hole and Sanya and Jorge were there with some of their off-duty NYU teammates drinking beer and being as silly as Jeri remembered from training. They hollered and whooped when they saw him and the barkeep handed him a bag of beer as he made his way over to them through the crowded bar and waved away his attempt to pay. He had had no time for the G gym and even the slight gravity of The Hole dragged at him and made his joints ache.

"Hey, this is our buddy from training." Sanya slapped him on the back, three tiny lightfiber roses gleaming on her left arm. Hits. "Hey, send me after some good stuff, will you?" She laughed. "I want something better than lost wrenches and junk. You guys, Jeri's Dispatch, can you believe it?"

They had no idea what Dispatch really was, but they were suitably impressed and for a time, he and Sanya and Jorge traded training stories of stupid mistakes, pranks, and good hits. He drank the beer and it was fun for awhile.

But it wasn't the same. He caught their brief sideways looks, read the hint of tension in Jorge's shoulders. He didn't belong here. The talk had turned to gossip and orbital politics and Jeri sat listening, looking into the invisible bubble of camaraderie. Outsider. Silently he finished his beer. Everything hurt with a subtle nagging ache and in spite of the buzz of beer in blood, the images of platforms, shuttles, and drifting bits of old stars lurked like a mist between him and the others as Jorge told a joke about some teammate's bad luck with love and everybody laughed.

"Hey, it's the new Dispatch."

Jeri looked up at the familiar voice.

"Hey, Zai." Sanya waved her over, respect in her tone as well as in the curve of her shoulders. "Jeri was in training with us. Jeri, this is Zai. She's NYU's Number One Team leader."

"Yeah, we've met," Jeri said as the tall jock carried her beer over. She had a few new tattoos, and her eyes met his, gleaming with laughter and maybe something more as she perched in a hammock next to him.

"I guess Delfinio's happy with you." She winked. "Congratulations."

"What about this Delfinio?" Jorge cracked his third beer. "Is he one of those weird Gypsies like I've heard, Jeri? Creepy."

With a single, fluid movement, Zai caught Jorge's foot and flipped him backward out of his hammock. He landed hard, even in the slight gravity, his beer skidding across the stained floor, trailing lacey foam. "Watch your mouth, newbie," Zai said very softly.

"Sorry." Jorge scrambled to his feet, rubbing the back of his head, his expression nervous. "Look, I'm really sorry." His glance skidded from teammate to teammate, finding no supporters. "I didn't mean . . ."

"Don't say what you don't mean." Zai turned her back on him. "Dispatch, I'd be honored to buy you a beer." She winked at Jeri, a bit of a leer

in that wink. "Let's take it up to the hub garden, eh? My friend works there and I have a pass."

They collected fresh beers and left The Hole and Jeri was aware of some envious stares from the other jocks. Zai indeed had a pass, so they rode one of the elevators up to the core of the huge, rotating can that was the NYUp platform. Here, thickly planted hydroponic tubes turned the hub into a jungle of leaves, fruits, and vegetables in the hot, bright glare of Sol. In the green-gold light filtering through the leaves, they drank their beer and Zai pulled him to her, stripping him out of his singlesuit with casual, lustful purpose, her grin easy and bright with sex.

It didn't work. Not really. It was there, between them, the slow spin of the planets, the cans, the ships and shuttles and junk.

"Your mind's not on your work, sweetheart." Zai drifted with her arms around his waist, her cheek against his hip. "Sorry I couldn't distract you."

"It wasn't you." Jeri's face was on fire, figured he was probably blushing clear down to his toes. Felt so . . . so . . . "I just . . ." He shook his head because how could you explain?

"Hey, when you get focused . . ." Zai pushed off, drifted a scant meter looking for her singlesuit, . . . "look me up." She snagged it and kicked off toward the elevator, her singlesuit trailing from one hand.

Jeri stared after her, a metallic taste in his mouth. Pulled on his singlesuit, collected the empty beer bags and followed her to the elevator. He dropped down to the level where he had docked the shuttle and let it take him back to Dispatch.

Delfinio was drifting in the center of Dispatch, his eyes glazed with seeing. He blinked to awareness as Jeri exited the shuttle, sighed and for once, didn't say anything.

"I tried to celebrate, Delfinio." Jeri let himself drift, upside down to Delfinio's orientation. He made no move to shift and match it. "It didn't work."

Still without speaking, Delfinio did one of his rotations, ended up eye to eye with Jeri.

"You knew it wouldn't, didn't you?" Jeri swallowed. "It's like there's a wall between me and everyone else." His voice trembled and he gulped in air, willed it to steady. "It's like I can't touch anyone. I'm not really living in their world. Like there's a sheet of glass between us." He sucked in a breath. "What did you *do* to me?"

"I am sorry." Delfinio's eyes, windows to forever, looked past him. At something Jeri couldn't see.

"I can't do this." Jeri spat the words through his teeth. "I won't do this. I wanted to be a rock jock. Do my part. Keep everyone safe. I didn't want . . ." He gulped, sucked breath. "I didn't ask to be turned into . . . into . . ."

"Some kind of alien?" Delfinio smiled finally, his eyes windows into vacuum. "I did not ask to be born in the wind from the stars or to hear their voices either, Jeri. Gypsies. You've heard me called that by now, eh?" Delfinio smiled thinly. "When my people, my family, left the platforms and moved out to the Oort, do you think I remained behind because of the pay?" He bared his teeth at Jeri. "How many 'Gypsies' have you seen on the plat-

forms? We do not belong here and we do not live here. You are what you are. I did not make you this way. But I showed you how you can matter. How many people truly matter, child? No. You will never belong anywhere . . . except here. I'm sorry and yes. I knew the price. I did not ask you if you wanted to pay it." His eyes touched Jeri with cold. "It is a lonely job."

Shuttle approaching, the system voice spoke up. *IDed as friend, personal name Shira.*

Delfinio blinked, his eyes narrowing briefly. "I have company," he snapped and Jeri recoiled from his sudden anger. "Perhaps you are right and you do not belong here."

"Wait a minute." Jeri pushed closer. "I need to understand. You said it's too late."

"Leave now." Delfinio's eyes blazed. "You will take the shuttle back to NYUp now. Stay there over night, think about what you are and how you wish to fit into this universe. We will talk about your future after that."

"No." Jeri pushed forward. "I want to sort this out now. I want to understand."

"And I don't want to explain. You are an annoying child." Delfinio pushed forward, so that Jeri retreated involuntarily. "Go now, *child*, and give me peace for my company. He has no reason to be annoyed by your problems." He turned his back on Jeri.

"Fine." Stung beyond words, Jeri palmed open the lock and pulled himself back into the little shuttle. So that was it? You are what you are, too bad, and don't bother me when I'm busy? He closed his eyes, but Zai's expression appeared against the darkness of his eyelids. *When you get focused*, she had said. Only he never would. Jeri gave a bitter laugh, passworded in, started to push off, head for NYUp. Go find a bar where nobody knew him and get seriously, stinking drunk, he thought. If nothing else, it might hurt less. For awhile. Then he hesitated, feeling like a kid sent off to bed so the grown-ups could talk. Pushed close to the lock door, touched the tiny viewscreen to life. Who was this friend whom Jeri would annoy?

Peeping tom, he thought. Delfinio will know.

So what? he thought and didn't blank the screen. A silvery chime announced that a shuttle had mated to the Dispatch module. Delfinio floated where Jeri had left him, hadn't moved. The hull shimmered and thinned to form a port and a small, wiry man with a tawny Bengali face dressed in an expensive spider-silk singlet drifted in. He had gym muscles and a big smile.

"Finio. It has been a long time." Shira toed off from the lock. "Bet you're surprised to see me," he said with a Euro accent.

"I am." Delfinio didn't move. "I heard a few rumors about your new life."

"They were probably correct. I am surprised that you did not delete my personal signature from your security waiver."

"I should have done that. I suppose. . . . I let friendship blind me." He didn't smile. "It was a mistake, was it not?"

"You are getting old, Finio. Once you did not make mistakes." The Euro Bengali smiled, closing on Delfinio. "You have always believed that this talent implies ethics. That is your blind spot, old man. I sold my soul to Tai Lan the pirate. He paid me very well for it. And I am very useful to

him. I find all the Security patrols for him. Only lately, someone has been finding my boss's ships and sending jocks after them. You are bad for business, Finio. Why are you interfering?"

"You are wrong about my belief," Delfinio cackled and drifted suddenly backward. "I am less blind than you believe. And every awakened talent is my responsibility. Forever, Shira. So what is your soul worth?"

"Your life." The Bengali thrust himself forward and Jeri caught a flash of bright steel. Then the two men rebounded, Delfinio's back arching spasmodically, a bright, crimson galaxy of blood droplets unfolding between them.

For a frozen moment, Jeri could only watch.

"Get out," Delfinio rasped, doubling over, trailing ruby beads.

He was speaking to Jeri. The words hit him as if Delfinio had slapped him across the face.

And Shira's head came up, eyes narrowing, searching. "You found another one, old man?" He pushed off from the hull with a toe, arrowed toward the privacy closets with a predator's intent.

Delfinio's shoulders hunched as he curled into a fetal position. "Now, fool," he whispered.

Jeri thawed. "Take off," he snapped and the shuttle quivered to life, shoving him against the hull as it pushed away from Dispatch. "NYUp dock regular space. NYUP One, contact. One! Attack on Dispatch. Get a team out here now. Weapons."

No response. None.

Communication is blocked, the shuttle voice told him.

It quivered and zagged sharply. Jeri bounced off the hull, slammed back against it as acceleration flattened him.

Evasive action, the ship said. *Threat detected. Communication damper detected. Instructions?*

Shira was after him. "Status," he yelled.

Closing fast.

Shira would use some sort of close-range, low energy weapon to avoid detection by the sensor net. Serious weaponry would set off all kinds of alarms and make people notice Dispatch's silence. But all Shira had to do was punch a hole in the hull. That's why you wore a v-suit as a rock jock. And this shuttle didn't have one. Think fast. Jeri's head spun. What would Shira expect him to do? Run for a can. "Head sunward," Jeri snapped. "Full acceleration." He wasn't webbed in and the sudden change in direction flung him across the cabin one more time. Red and black stars exploded in his vision as he slammed face-first into the hull.

Closing fast. The shuttle's voice didn't change.

Damn it. Nothing, nothing, nothing he could do.

And then . . . the hull vanished. It was like he had passworded into Dispatch. He could see . . . everything. The matte black little ship coming up fast behind him, the huge blaze of the sun, a million million suns beyond it. For a second, Jeri relaxed. *If I have to die*, he thought . . . A flare on the blazing surface of the sun caught his eye. He looked and his vision sharpened, as if someone had turned up the resolution. From the lazy curl of the sun's huge, fiery tongue, something like a swarm of tiny dust specks burst toward him.

For a moment, Jeri stared, squinting, trying to understand. . . .

... proton storm. He got it, suddenly. A Super-X class event. The last one like this had happened before he was born. People had died. Usually you had warning. Usually, coronal mass ejections tossed protons out slowly, predictably. Usually you had time to get everyone in behind the ice-shields and radiation skins of the platforms.

But three times since the platforms began, they had come out fast, in a wild spray, caught in the spiraled magnetic field of the sun, and had slashed across Near Earth like a sword of God.

I can't be seeing this, Jeri thought. No password, no hardware to plug him into the sensor net. People would die. A lot of people. "New York One," he yelled in desperation. "Read me?"

Yeah, Dispatch, what's up?

Miracle! He wanted to cry. The voice was so damn normal. Either the communication damper had failed or ... Jeri glanced over his shoulder, but Shira was still on his butt. "Super X protons coming. Get everyone in," he yelled. "Now!"

No more time, no more time. ... These little shuttles didn't have shielding, you weren't out in this kind of stuff. Which would get him first? he wondered. Protons or whatever weapon Shira was carrying?

And then he saw it. A 'roid, a rocky lump, stable in orbit, out of the traffic zones, so nobody cared as it plodded its way around the sun.

It would stop the protons. Enough anyway.

Got to get the timing right ... got to ... he grabbed for the webbing, got himself more or less webbed in, shifted the shuttle to manual, hands on the holod controls that appeared. Zigged. Zagged. Evasive maneuvers, but they brought him closer to the 'roid. Not yet, not yet ... he could *feel* Shira's triumph and his back twitched, expecting vacuum. With his new vision he watched the sandstorm of sun-white particles speeding toward them. If Shira had the same sight—but maybe he was focused on Jeri.

He hoped so.

Not yet ... not yet. Sweating, Jeri held his course. Now! He imagined he could feel the crackle of a million electron volts of cell-destroying energy around him as he doubled back, nearly sideswiping Shira's ship as he darted into the shadow of the 'roid.

Nothing to see, nothing you could really feel. Red icons exploded in the control holos. Beyond the shadow of the rock he was hiding under, the energies climbed ... two hundred million electron volts, two-fifty. Caught in the full sweep of the sun's fierce burst, Shira's ship wavered and began to tumble. Something had gone out. How much rem was Shira absorbing in his light, unprotected ship, Jeri wondered. Three hundred rem? Four hundred?

In hours, he would be dead. Nothing could save him now.

"New York One?" Jeri said.

Communication software was permanently disabled at launch, the ship told him.

Jeri blinked. He called up the ship's log, ran through the communications. He found his original attempt to contact NYUp One, iconed incomplete. And no others. I talked to them, Jeri thought. I warned them. Without a link?

Not possible.

The storm-front had passed. Jeri waited for the energy levels to fall to

something he could tolerate with radiation therapy afterward, images of Delfinio bleeding to death alone at Dispatch haunting his brain. At least Dispatch was shielded. More than adequately. As soon as he dared, he headed back.

He didn't see Shira's ship.

Delfinio drifted in a galaxy of dark crimson droplets when Jeri burst into Dispatch. Swearing, Jeri pushed off, relief spiking through him as his hands closed around Delfinio's shoulders and his brain registered *warm*. Clumsy in his hurry, he barely managed to shield Delfinio from impact as he rebounded off the hull, scattering ruby beads of fresh blood.

Delfinio grunted and his eyes fluttered. His lips twitched into an almost-smile before pain twisted them.

"Just hang on." Jeri palmed the emergency med closet open. The coffin-shaped crèche unfolded and Jeri maneuvered Delfinio into it. Shira had stabbed him in the chest. "You die on me and I'll . . . I'll kill you. Hear me?"

Delfinio's lips twitched again and the smile glimmered in his eyes for a second. Micro-tubes snaked out of the crèche, probing like blind worms, burrowing into Delfinio's jugular, carotid, into the veins on his arms and thighs as Jeri webbed him into place. "You're going to be okay," he said, his voice catching, ignoring the red icons glimmering on the sides of the crèche. "You have to be, because I want to know what's happening to me. You owe me that, hear?"

"I hear." Delfinio's words emerged as the faintest of whispers and pink foam bubbled at the corners of his lips. Then the drugs pumping through the micro-tubes took over and his eyes glazed.

Panicked, Jeri scanned the icons, but Delfinio was still alive, his heart-beat uneven, more red and yellow than green visible, but . . . still alive. "Contact . . . NYUp One," he said.

Dispatch? That you, Jeri? The voice at One nearly yelled. *Man, you saved our butts with that warning. We've got sick people all over, but we would've had a lot more casualties if we hadn't hit the alarm. Way to go.*

"Get a med team out here," Jeri said. "Pirate hit Dispatch. Delfinio's in bad shape."

On our way. One's voice sobered. Be there before you can blink twice.

Oh, I do not think you need to worry, Delfinio's voice murmured in his head. I do not think you will be stuck on Dispatch without me.

He couldn't be talking, not with the catheters in him. Jeri pushed across to the crèche. The icons glowed a cacophony of red.

"Damn it, you can't leave me here by myself."

And he could have sworn that Delfinio smiled.

Or maybe he just felt it.

I agree, Dispatch. The whisper touched him. And the breeze will blow through others, too. You will find them. Not all will be Shira. But it is a lonely job.

Jeri lifted his head and looked . . . outward. Beyond the slow spin of the platforms to the distant dance of suns and planets like multicolored jewels. With a wrench, he brought himself back. Then he simply waited for the rock jocks to arrive, surrounded by a drifting galaxy of drying blood and crystal tears. ○

THE LION

Bruce McAllister

Bruce McAllister's new short story collection from Golden Gryphon, *The Girl Who Loved Animals*, will feature an introduction by Harry Harrison and an afterword by Barry Malzberg. The book, which will include a few stories that first saw publication in *Asimov's*, will be out later this year. Its stories cover the five decades—"from teenager through guy with more than half a century under his expanding belt"—that Bruce has been writing and publishing SF.

When the sculptor Bertel Thorvaldsen created the "Lion of Lucerne," he was inspired, he told friends, by a story he had heard as a child—a story about a lion, a real lion, that had appeared miraculously in battle that terrible day in Paris in 1792 and fought so valiantly alongside the Swiss Guard, but whose body was never found. "That creature has lived inside me," he confessed. "It has haunted my dreams."

—*Mythopoeia*, "The Lion of Lucerne"

In August of that turbulent year, as France underwent its Revolution, the insurrectionaries stormed the Palais des Tuileries where Louis XVI hid with his family; and at this very moment were killing the Swiss Guards who had sworn to protect the royal family with their lives. As the battle raged before the palace, a lion—an actual lion—wounded, blinded by its own blood—dragged itself slowly from the battlefield through the manicured gardens, collapsing in a tiny grotto hidden by hedges and carved from limestone by an artisan whose name was already forgotten.

For an instant, shimmering like a dream, the lion became a man, a big one, the kind who might be a smithy or butcher, blinded by his own blood and dying too; but then the man was a lion again, the nostrils flaring, the mane matted with blood and the chest rattling with a growl it could not help. The change took no more than a tortured moment and was like a spasm, as if God were unsure what the lion should be this day.

The spear that had been driven through his back had broken off, with only a piece remaining, but the pain was so great that man and lion both wondered if it would ever end.

He could barely keep his eyes open, and his legs, heavy with the death of others, sprawled beneath him, the hair on them curled with blood. Though he tried to hold it up, his head dropped to his forepaws; and because blood filled his nostrils, bubbling at each breath he took, he had to breathe through open jaws and could no longer smell the carnage of the battlefield.

Is it right, he wanted to ask, and, by wanting to, did, to kill if you kill for what you love?

From the day he had had his first vision—of a wounded lion dying in a grotto in a beautiful garden somewhere—Alain Sabatier had become fascinated with all things leonine. He visited more than once the duke's zoo in Arles, which had two lions and was only two days' travel from his village. In Arles's shops he also found charcoal drawings and fine etchings of lions, some anatomically correct, some not, though on a butcher's wages he could afford but the cheapest. At the cathedral in Nance—four days' travel from Pelet—he gazed for hours at a locket made from the hair of a lion's mane which sat beside an urn bearing, so the Bishop said, ashes from the prophet Daniel's bones. And in Limours, only a day away, he could touch an actual necklace of lion's talons, a bottle of alcohol containing a lion's spleen, the tuft from a lion's tail, and a box of lion's teeth—all in an apothecary's shop—until the owner told him to purchase something or leave.

Against the protestations of his wife, to whom he had confessed his visions and who was frightened by them, he sold the figurines and vases they had. With this money, which could have gone to clothing for their two sons, and with the extra money he was now making working hours before dawn for his cousin, a baker, he had enough to purchase a lion's talon, strands of hair and a tooth. When his wife looked as if she might cry, he said, "I have no choice." If he did not purchase these items, how could he make the visions cease? Did the visions not concern her as much as they did him?

The visions did not stop with these purchases; and when, in the middle of one of them, he sliced half a finger off, he went immediately to Hameaux de Cergy to consult the priest Père Meynen, who, upon hearing his story, stepped back, turned pale and told him he must burn all of the items he had acquired, for they were witchcraft. Sabatier burned the hair and talon, but not the lion's tooth, which was too beautiful to burn. After all, the lion came to him in his visions dying, asking that he mourn it because there was no one else to do so. How could he mourn the creature without a piece of a lion's body to hold?

When the burning of the talon and the hair did not stop the visions either, he made plans for a longer trip. He gave his wife the money he had received that month from his cousin and also asked his cousin and his cousin's wife to watch over his family while he was gone. Then he set out on the road north to the abbey of Milly-la-Forêt, where a monk lived that many considered a living saint. Here Sabatier presented his problem; and the monk, who looked at him for a long time with gentle, watery eyes, said at last, "I am sorry, *petit fils de Dieu*, but there is nothing I can do for

you—nothing that anyone can do. Your visions are God's private words to you and to you alone."

Sabatier shook his head, feeling despair.

"However," the old man added, "my own soul—which often hears God's private words as well—urges me to have you crush the lion's tooth and then drink it with the milk that a lamb drinks."

"Why, *Messieur*?"

"You will know when it is time to know."

"How?"

"By the words of those around you. By rumors from Paris. By the *excitement and fear*."

Sabatier returned home, not understanding, but did as he was told, crushing the lion's tooth with an apothecary's mortar and pestle, mixing it with ewe's milk, and then drinking it. Though he slept well that night, and though the visions ceased for three days, they did resume and with greater disruption of his life. He did not know when a vision would strike him like a seizure and he would be unable to work for an hour or a day; and the more this happened, the more afraid his wife became and the more the people of the village shunned him, believing him possessed. Only when, months later, word of the insurrections in Paris reached his village and everyone was speaking of them did he remember the monk's words; and remembering them, felt a great relief and a terrible longing to be in Paris, to be present for—what had the monk said?—*the excitement and fear*.

It was with this very longing one hot night a week later, and for the very first time—in the room where the four of them slept, his wife beside him—that Sabatier *became* the lion.

As he lay on their bed, he found that he could hear what he should not have been able to hear: people snoring in nearby houses, a dog running in the street outside, bats swooping for insects in the night sky. He found that he could see, even in the darkness of the room, what no man should be able to see: The faces of his wife and children, their eyelashes, the trembling of a lip in a dream. He found that he could *smell* them, too—the blood and flesh that made their bodies bodies. His chest was rumbling strangely; and when he touched his own face, it was not with fingers, but with a paw as big as a child's head; and though it had no fingers, he could feel with it the hair on his face and the muzzle that his mouth had become.

Lest his wife feel the difference and wake, he pulled away from her and remained as still as he could until his hearing became a comfortable deafness, his sight a familiar blindness, his nostrils full of his own sweat and nothing more, and the rumbling gone at last, so that he might sleep.

The first man he had killed as a lion had taken no planning. He had found the man in a fabric shop in an alley in Provins-Gare, where he had gone to buy a pig and was late returning home. The man was beating his own son, a child of love, an innocent. Upon seeing the father's attempt to kill within the child a thing God surely loved, he had become the lion again. It had taken only a moment, and he had barely felt it. The lion had

snarled once, and then, unable to help itself, had killed the father, pulling his entrails from him and dragging them through the alley as neighbors watched—even as the boy watched. The boy had not screamed, though the neighbors had. The boy had looked on mutely as if understanding: *The duty of love to kill that which might kill love*. It was a miracle, one that the city would speak of for years: A lion appearing from nowhere to kill a man who beat his son every day until the boy could no longer speak.

In the darkness of the alley, far from the boy's neighbors, he had become a man again, just as easily, and returned empty-handed to his village. When his wife asked him about the blood on his hands and face, he had lied, of course, telling her he had been beaten by ruffians—the same ones who had stolen his pig. Accepting his story, she had washed him lovingly, and in bed that night he had wept silently, though he was not certain why.

Every night Paris had pulled at him with a strange longing, but he had resisted. He did so for the simple reason—one that needed only his obeisance—that other miracles were needed before he could go; that there were other men and women he would need to find first:

A woman who ran a brothel in Monte Cellini, on the southeastern border, who, when her girls were with child, let them die under a doctor's filthy tool and paid the man for each death.

A cousin of the *dauphin* who poisoned the grain of a village simply on a bet, killing everyone.

A captain of the Parisian Cavalry who raped children before he sold them.

And all the others he would need, as a lion, to kill in God's name, and so did.

When in July the longing grew too intense and he could neither eat nor sleep, he left for Paris at last. He would not see his wife and sons again—this he knew—and he fought his tears; but he had no choice. He needed to be in Paris, living on the streets as a man, homeless, waiting.

The lion pulled itself to the edge of the grotto's floor, into the unbearable heat of day, and, eyes barely seeing, looked into the pool of water by its feet, the water that could have washed so much away were it right to do so. *Would it be right?* He did not know. He tried to see the battlefield, but through the blood could not. He could still hear what no man would—swords slicing quietly through bone, the whispers of torn throats, even the straining hearts of the combatants—but he could not see.

He shook his head and blood flew from it; and for a moment he could see the insurrectionaries, some dead, some still standing in a stupor, in street clothes, waving their muskets and pistols and swords. And the bodies of the Guard in their red and white and blue uniforms. These bodies did not move or, if they did, they moved with the same pain that made his own legs so heavy.

Is it enough to kill for what you believe, if what you believe is only a king—while those you kill are willing to die for what may be closer to what a God loves?

He could not hear God's answer, nor did he know whether God heard him, or even whether the question had an answer. Men died. Men killed each other and died, and a lion who was a man and a man who was a lion would die today. Of that there was no doubt. Was it any more than this?

Is it enough to be a lion in the name of God?

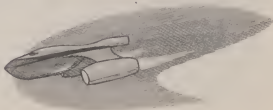
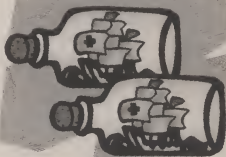
He did not know. The battlefield called to him, whispering. It was where he was meant to die, not here in the grotto. Nostrils flaring, he rose slowly on four legs with what breath he had and, stumbling past the pool of water that whispered to him, too, made his way toward the palace, to the first bodies, where he lost his strength and fell. There, on the hands and knees of a man, eyes blind again, he touched a corpse with fingers that had, for most of the battle, been an animal's paw, talons, hair. With his fingers he felt cloth and metal and slick blood, touched another body, one that moved, that made a sound like the word "*Mère!*" and then another, this one still as well; and the next, one that squirmed weakly. For neither the still nor the moving could he do a thing except touch them and mutter a prayer.

Then, with a strength that might have been the lion's or the man's or something else entirely, he got up, steadied himself, and began to walk through the bodies. And this, the sight of a simple man—a blind butcher with a broken spear through his still-beating heart as he walked among the fallen—would, he saw now, be forgotten, even as the lion—the miracle any God would have chosen—would be remembered forever. ○

BOTTLES

When I was young,
my grandfather built ships
in bottles. A disappointment
at first; when dad said
Grandpa was building boats
I imagined him with a gun,
firing hot rivets into iron.

Still, the bottles offer
their own pleasure, and
the ships were a surprise:
space, not sail. Some
the great galactic ladies
of fiction: The Enterprise,

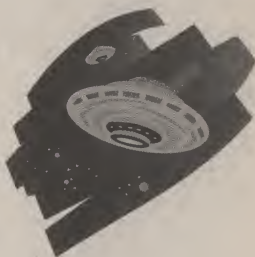


of course, Lying Bastard,
Rama, and a minute Skylark.

Some were not fictional per
se, but instead hypothetical:
Grandpa's version of a light
sail, gossamer belly cast from
reworked Frisbees, anomalous
bean stalks built of popsicle sticks.



When I was young,
the ships were the wonder.
Now that I'm not,
it's the bottles.
There's something wondrous
about a hyperspace shunt
inside a two liter Dr. Pepper,
a ramjet inside a Classic Coke.



I used to wonder at the ships.
Now I wonder at the nature
of the bottles that contain them.
Are they simply material,
glass and plastic bent from
original consumer purposes to
hold visionary beasts?
Or are they symbolic, serving
to mark the confines of
gravity, society, and perhaps
the fabric of spacetime:
improvised Kleins
with everything and
nothing inside?



—Greg Beatty

PUBLIC SAFETY

Matthew Johnson

Matthew Johnson's first story for us, "The Ninth Part of Desire," appeared in our June 2006 issue. Other publications include stories in *Strange Horizons*, *Tesseract Ten*, and *Fantasy Magazine*. Matthew is currently working on a novelization of Byzantine chess, and, in "Public Safety," he certainly offers us a Byzantine view of reality.

Officier de la Paix Louverture folded Quartidi's *Père Duchesne* into thirds, fanning himself against the Thermidor heat. The news inside was all bad, anyway: another theater had closed, leaving the *Comedie Française* the only one open in Nouvelle-Orleans. At least the *Duchesne* could be counted on to report only what the Corps told them to, that the *Figaro* had closed for repairs, and not the truth—which was that audiences, frightened by the increasing number of fires and other mishaps at the theaters, had stopped coming. The *Minerve* was harder to control, but the theater-owners had been persuaded not to talk to their reporters, to avoid a public panic. No matter that these were all clearly accidents: even now, in the year 122, reason was often just a thin layer of ice concealing a pre-Revolutionary sea of irrationality.

On the table in front of him sat his plate of beignets, untouched. He had wanted them when he had sat down, but the arrival of the group of *gardiens stagieres* to the café made him lose his appetite. He told himself it was just his cynicism that caused him to react this way, his desire to mock their pride in their spotless uniforms and caps, and not the way they looked insolently in his direction as they ordered their cafés au lait. Not for the first time Louverture wondered if he should have stayed in Saint-Domingue.

The *gardiens stagieres* gave a cry as another of their number entered the café, but instead of heading for their table he approached Louverture. As he neared, Louverture recognized him: Pelletier, a runner, who, despite being younger than the just-graduated bunch across the room, had already seen a great deal more than they.

"Excuse me, sir," Pelletier said. Though it was early, sweat had already drawn a thick line across the band of his cap: he must have run all the way from the Cabildo. "Commandant Trudeau needs to see you right away."

Louverture nodded, glanced at his watch: it was three eighty-five, almost time to start work anyway. "Thank you, Pelletier," he said; the young man's face brightened at the use of his name. "My coffee and beignets just arrived, and it seems I won't have time to enjoy them; why don't you take a moment to rest?" He reached into his pocket, dropped four deci-francs in a careful pile on the table.

"Thank you, sir," Pelletier said; he took off his cap, revealing a thick bristle of sweat-soaked blond hair.

Louverture tapped his own cap in reply, headed for the west exit of the Café du Monde; he lingered there for a moment, just out of sight, watched as Pelletier struggled to decide whether to sit at the table Louverture had just vacated or join the group of young gardiens who were, assuming that out of sight meant out of hearing, now making sniggering comments about café au lait and Creole rice. When Pelletier chose the empty table, Louverture smiled to himself and stepped out onto Danton Street.

It had grown hotter, appreciably, in the time since he had arrived at the café; such people as were about clung to the shade like lizards, loitering under the awnings of the building where the Pasteur Brewery made its tasteless beer. Louverture crossed the street at a run, dodging the constant flow of velocipedes, and braced himself for the sun-bleached walk across Descartes Square. He walked past the statue of the Goddess of Reason, with her torch of inquiry and book of truth; the shadow of her torch reached out to the edge of the square, where stenciled numbers marked the ten hours of the day. He doffed his cap to her as always, then gratefully reached the shadows of the colonnade that fronted the Cabil-do, under the inscription that read *RATIO SUPER FERVEO*.

"Commandant Trudeau wishes to see you, sir," the gardien at the desk said. The stern portrait of Jacques Hébert on the wall behind glowered down at them.

Louverture nodded, went up the stairs to Trudeau's office. Inside he saw Trudeau at his desk, looking over a piece of paper; Officier de la Paix Principal Clouthier was standing nearby.

"Louverture, good to see you," Trudeau said. His sharp features and high forehead reminded those who met him of Julius Caesar; modestly, Trudeau underlined the resemblance by placing a bust of the Roman emperor on his desk. "I'm sorry to call you in early, but an important case has come up, something I wanted you to handle personally."

"Of course, sir. What is it?"

Trudeau passed the paper to him. "What do you make of this?" It was a sheet of A4 paper, on which were written the words *Elle meurt la treizième*.

"She dies on the thirteenth," Louverture read. "This is a photo-stat. There is very little else I can say about it."

"Physical Sciences has the original," Clouthier put in. His round face was redder than usual, with the heat; where Trudeau let his hair grow in long waves, Clouthier kept his cut short to the skull, like a man afraid of lice. "They barely consented to making two copies, one for us and one for the Graphologist."

"And Physical Sciences will tell you it is a sheet of paper such as can be bought at any stationer's," Louverture said, "and the ink is everyday ink,

and the envelope—if they remembered to examine the envelope—was sealed with ordinary glue. They will not tell you what the letter smells like, or the force with which the envelope was sealed, because these things cannot be measured.”

“Which is why we need you,” Trudeau said. “Concentrate on the text for the moment: the other parts will fall into place in time.”

“I take it there was no ransom demand?” Louverture said; Trudeau nodded. That was why they had called him, of course: his greatest successes had been in finding the logic behind crimes that seemed, to others, to be irrational. Crimes they thought a little black blood made him better able to solve.

“No daughters of prominent families missing, either, so far as we know,” Clouthier said. “We have gardiens stagieres canvassing them now.”

Louverture smiled, privately, at the thought of the group at the café being called away on long, hot velocipede rides around the city. “Of course, the families of kidnap victims often choose not to inform the police—though rationally, they have much better chances with us involved. Still, I do not think that is the case here: if a kidnapper told the family not to involve the police, why the letter to us? Tell me, Commandant, to whom was the letter addressed? Did it come by mail or was it delivered by hand?”

“By hand,” Clouthier said before Trudeau could answer. “Pinned on one of the flames of Reason’s torch—a direct challenge to us.”

“Strange, though, that they should give us so much time to respond,” Trudeau mused. “The thirteenth of Fructidor is just under two décades away. Why so much warning? It seems irrational.”

“Crimes by sane men are always for gain, real or imagined,” Louverture said. “If not money, then perhaps power, as a man murders his wife’s lover to regain his lost power over her. The whole point may be to see how much power such a threat can give this man over us. Perhaps the best thing would be to ignore this, at least for now.”

“And let him think he’s cowed us?” Clouthier said.

“The Corps de Commande is not cowed,” Trudeau said gently. “We judge, sanely and rationally, if something is an accident or a crime; should it be a crime, we take the most logical course of action appropriate. But in this case, Officier Louverture, I think we must respond. If you are correct, ignoring this person would only lead him to do more in hopes of getting a response from us. If you are incorrect, then we certainly must take action, do you agree?”

“Of course, Commandant,” Louverture said.

“Very good. I have the Lombrosologist working on a composite sketch; once you have findings from him, Graphology, and Physical Sciences, the investigation is yours. I expect daily reports.”

Louverture nodded, saluted the two men, and stepped out into the hall. Clouthier closed the heavy live-oak door after he left, and Louverture could hear out his name being spoken three times in the minute he stood there. He hurried down the steps to the cool basement where the scientific services were and went into the Lombrosology department, knocking on the door as he opened it.

“Allard, what do you have for me?” he called.

"Your patience center is sorely underdeveloped," a voice said from across the room. "Along with your minuscule amatory faculty, it makes for a singularly misshapen skull."

The laboratory was a mess, as always; labeled busts on every shelf and table, and skulls in such profusion that without Allard's cheerful disposition the place would have seemed like a charnel house. Instead it felt more like a child's playroom, the effect magnified by the scientist's system of color-coding the skulls: a dab of red paint for executed criminals, green for natural deaths, and a cheery bright blue for suicides. In the corner of the room, Allard sat at the only desk with open space on it, carefully measuring a Lombroso bust with a pair of calipers and recording the results.

Louverture picked up a skull from the table nearest him; it had a spot of red paint and the words *Meurtrier—Nègre* written on it. "It is not my skull I am concerned with today," he said.

"But it is such a fascinating specimen," Allard said in full sincerity. He had asked Louverture repeatedly to let him make a detailed study of his skull: on their first meeting he had, without introduction, run his hands over Louverture's head and pronounced that he was fortunate to have the rational faculty of the Frank and the creativity of the Negro.

"Could we stick to the matter at hand?" Louverture said.

"Of course, of course." Allard put down his calipers, turned his full attention to Louverture. "My sketch won't be ready for an hour or so, though."

"Never mind that. What can you tell me about the man who wrote the letter?"

Allard picked up the notes he had been consulting, peered through his pince-nez as he flipped through them. "He is most likely not a habitual criminal, so he will lack the prominent jaw we associate with that type. He also likely possesses a need for self-aggrandizement—a man of whom more was expected, perhaps, with very likely a prominent forehead. The need for attention suggests a second child or later, so look for a round skull overall—"

"I wasn't aware you could tell birth order," Louverture said, putting the skull in his hand back on the table.

"You haven't been keeping up with the literature. It was in last Pluviôse's *Journal*—the mother's parts, not yet stretched with birth, pinch the first child's head, rendering it more pointed than later children. All else being equal, of course."

Louverture nodded. "Yes, of course. And—the race—?" He was accustomed to tiptoeing around the subject; most of his colleagues seemed to feel they were doing him a favor by treating him as white to his face and black behind his back.

"A tricky question," Allard said, apparently feeling no discomfort at the topic. In fact he was likely the least prejudiced man in the Corps, genuinely seeing black and white as scientific categories. "What we know shows significant forethought, which suggests a Frank or perhaps an Anglo-Saxon; the apparent motive, however, is irrational, which of course suggests a Negro. On the whole, I would tend to favor one of the European types. Why? Do you suspect . . ."

"It's nothing," Louverture said, letting the unspoken question hang in the air. It was the reason he had been given the case, of course: the fear

that this was the work of irrationalists, believers in religion and black magic. The vodoun murders of three years previous had brought him here from Saint-Domingue, and though they had earned him his office and reputation, he had often heard whispers that like follows like.

"I can give you a sketch for each race, if you wish," Allard said. "It will take a bit longer, of course."

"Take your time. The sketch will be of little use until we have a suspect to compare it to."

Allard nodded abstractly, his attention returned to the model head in front of him. "As you say."

Louverture tipped his cap in farewell, stepped out into the hallway and headed up the stairs toward his office, wondering how he might conduct an investigation in which he did not have a single lead. A cryptic threat to an unidentified woman, an unmailed letter delivered by an unseen hand. . . . Clouthier's canvass would turn up nothing, of course; if the culprit did not want a ransom, he might just as easily take a poor woman, or even a prostitute.

By the time he reached his office, Louverture had decided that Allard's delay, as well as the no doubt slow progress of the graphologist and of Physical Sciences, gave him the excuse to do just what he had first proposed: ignore the whole matter and hope the letter-writer went away, or at least provided him with another clue. He was disappointed, therefore, to open his office door and find the graphologist's report sitting on his desk. Louverture settled into his chair, lit the halogen lamp, and began to read. *Open curves, large space between letters: male. Confident pen-strokes: written cool-headed, without excitement or fear of discovery.* He frowned. That did not square with the notion that the letter-writer was seeking to arouse a reaction from the police, but what other motive made sense? *Correctly formed letters: well-educated in a good school.* This seemed even more illogical. Anyone who received an education knew that all criminals were eventually caught, save those whose confederates turned on them first. *Neat, precise capitals: a man of some authority.*

Louverture closed his eyes, rubbed at them with thumb and forefinger. A confident man who nevertheless had a pathological need for attention, and felt neither fear nor excitement in taunting the police—as though the message had been composed and written by two different men. The writer, though, had not been coerced, since the letters showed no fear, so what sort of partnership was he looking at? An intelligent criminal with tremendous sang-froid, paired with an insecure, weak-willed . . . but no, it made no sense. The former would restrain the latter from any attention-getting activities, not assist in them; unless a bargain of some sort was involved, the cool-headed man having to gratify the other's needs in order to gain something he required. Access to something he possessed, perhaps—or someone—

Well, it was a pretty play he had written: all he needed was a pair of actors for the parts. Louverture tore a piece of paper from the pad on his desk, uncapped his fountain pen, and wrote *Imagine two criminals—group like faculties* on it. The first criminal, the cool-headed one, would have had little contact with the police, but the second, he very likely could

not help it. He opened the bottom drawer of his desk, rummaged inside for a tube labeled LOMBROSOLOGIE; rolled the paper up, tucked it in the tube, and pushed the whole thing into the pneumatic. Standing, he turned the neck of his lamp to point its beam at his bookshelf, then scanned the leather-bound volumes of the Rogues' Gallery there. What would the excitable man's earlier crimes have been? Nothing spectacular, but at the same time something directed at gaining attention. Public nudity, perhaps? Harassment? A man with a wife, a daughter, a sister, perhaps a domestic living in. A man with little self-control, and yet not truly poor, or else how would he have met the educated man he was partnered with? If not poor, though, his neighbors would have complained about the noise that almost certainly came from his house; Louverture took Volume Twenty-Three, Noise Infractions, off the shelf and added it to the pile on the desk.

He was not sure how much time had passed when he heard the door open. He looked up from the book in front of him, expecting to see Allard with his sketches; instead it was Clouthier. Louverture stood, gave a small salute.

"Officier Principal, what can I do for you?"

Clouthier cleared his throat, brushed at his dark blue jacket with his fingertips. "It's past six. Are we going to see your progress report today?"

"I haven't received anything from Lombrosology or Physical Sciences yet."

"I'm told you haven't given orders to any of the gardiens to search or arrest anyone. Have you spent the whole day reading books?" Clouthier asked, looking around at Louverture's desk and shelves with distaste.

"I've been rounding up known criminals," Louverture said. "Doing it this way saves your men time and energy. Incidentally, are my reports not to go to Commandant Trudeau?"

"To him through me. Public safety is my responsibility, and I must respond quickly to any threat."

"We have almost twenty days," Louverture said mildly.

"If whoever wrote that letter is being truthful. Have you often known criminals to be truthful, Louverture?"

"Why bother to give us the letter and then lie in it? If he wanted to avoid detection, wouldn't it have been better not to alert us at all?"

Clouthier coughed loudly. "It's nonsense to expect him to be logical—if he were a rational man, he'd know better than to be a criminal."

Louverture nodded. "As you say. I'll make sure my report is on your desk before you go—how much longer were you planning on staying tonight?"

"Never mind," Clouthier said. "Just have it there before I get here in the morning."

"Of course. Is there anything else?"

Clouthier seemed to think for a moment, then shook his head, turned to leave. "Just keep me informed."

Louverture waited until Clouthier was out the door, then called to him. "Oh, Officier Principal, I forgot to ask—did your canvass turn anything up?"

With a barely perceptible shake of his head, Clouthier stepped out into the hall. Though he could not help smiling, Louverture wondered whether

that had been a miscalculation. It was no secret that Clouthier did not like him, a situation caused as much by his coming from outside the local Corps hierarchy as by his mixed blood. It would be best, he thought, to leave off further teasing of the lion for now. Resolving to restrain himself better, Louverture returned to his desk and began writing his report.

The next morning, Louverture read over his notes, trying to get them to make sense. He had taken the omnibus instead of his velocipede so that he could read on his way to work, laying the pages atop the briefcase on his lap, but the heat and vibration kept him from concentrating. His cap was damp with sweat, but he refused to take it off; he knew from experience how people reacted when they saw his dark, kinked hair emerge from under an officier's hat. Not that there were many people to react this morning, the omnibus being only half-full.

He forced his mind to return to its task. If his theory was right, the second man was undoubtedly the key, but he had not found anyone in the Rogues' Gallery that fit the profile. Could a man with such a need for attention possibly have hidden it all these years? Perhaps he had had another outlet until recently—an actor, for instance, put out of work by the theater closings. . . .

A sudden jolt interrupted Louverture's train of thought. He looked up from his notes, saw that the omnibus had stopped in the middle of the street. The driver had already disembarked, and the other passengers were filing off, grumbling.

"Excuse me," he said to the man in front of him, "what has happened?"

"It broke down again," the man said. "Third time this month. I'd do better on foot."

Louverture followed the queue onto the sidewalk. A few of the passengers had gathered to wait for the next omnibus; the rest hailed pedicabs or walked off down the street. The driver had the bonnet open and was looking inside; Louverture tapped him on the shoulder. "What is the matter with it?"

The driver turned his head and opened his mouth to speak, closed it when he saw Louverture's uniform. "It's corroded, sir," he said. "Do you smell that?"

Louverture took a sniff; a sharp smell, like lemon but much more harsh, emanated from the omnibus' hood. "That is the engine?"

"The battery, sir," the driver said. "That's sulfuric acid inside; eventually it eats away at the whole thing."

"This happens often?"

The driver shook his head. "They break down sometimes, but not usually like this. The scientists think it may be the heat."

"And they're sure it's a natural phenomenon? It hasn't been reported to the Corps."

"I suppose," the driver said, shrugged. "Why in Reason's name would anyone sabotage an omnibus? What's to gain from it?"

"Well, I hope they solve the problem soon."

The driver laughed. "Me too. Much longer and I'll need another job—there'll be no one riding them at all."

Louverture tapped the brim of his cap to the man and stepped over to the curb to hail a pedicab. He could hear the other passengers grumbling a bit when one stopped at the sight of his badge, saw the obvious annoyance of the man inside whose cab he had commandeered. He disliked being so high-handed, but he could not afford to be late: after his little dig at Clouthier the night before, the man would be looking for reasons to undermine him.

His fears were realized when he arrived at the Cabildo at three-ninety five and the gardien at the desk waved him over. "Officier Principal Clouthier is waiting for you in the interrogation room, sir," he said.

Louverture tapped his cap in acknowledgment and went through the big double doors that led to the interrogation and holding areas, hoping Clouthier had not done anything that would make his job more difficult. When he arrived at the interrogation room he saw the man himself, talking to the gardien at the door to the cell.

"Louverture, nice of you to come in," Clouthier said, bursting with scarcely restrained smugness.

"What's this?" Louverture asked, looking through one of the recessed portholes in the wall; he saw, inside, a dark-skinned Negro sitting at the table. "You have a suspect? How did you find him?"

"He was in possession of another copy of the note, along with paper, pen, and ink that precisely matched those used to write the letter, according to Physical Sciences," Clouthier said. "So we brought him in."

Louverture took a long breath in and out. "And just how did you find this particular pen-and-paper owner?"

"I had my men search some of the worse areas of Tremé at dawn this morning. I am not afraid to expend a little time and energy, if it gets results."

"And I suppose he vigorously resisted arrest? I ask only because black skin shows bruises so poorly, I might not know otherwise."

"A little rough handling only. Commandant Trudeau directed that I leave the interrogation to you."

"Gracious thanks," Louverture said. "If you'll excuse me." He nodded to the gardien to open the door and went inside. The suspect was sitting on a light cane chair, his hands chained behind his back; his face, at least, was unmarked. "I am Officier de la Paix Louverture," he said in a calm voice. "What is your name?"

"Duhaime," the man stuttered. "Lucien Duhaime." He looked quickly at the door.

"We are alone," Louverture said. "You may speak freely. Do you know why you have been arrested, Monsieur Duhaime?"

"I didn't—I don't know how that paper got there."

"Someone planted paper, pen, and ink in your house, without you knowing?" Duhaime opened his mouth to speak, closed it again. Louverture shook his head. "Well then, how did it get there?"

"I don't—I don't know."

"I see." Louverture sighed. Now there was one man to compose the note, another to write it, a third to deliver it: too large a cast for the play to be believable. Sitting down opposite Duhaime, he realized he still had his briefcase with him; in a sudden inspiration he set it on the table and

opened it with the top toward the prisoner, so Duhaime could not see the contents. "I keep the tools of my trade in this case, Lucien. Do you know what they are?"

Duhaime shook his head.

"The most important one is my razor."

Duhaime's eyes widened. Louverture took out his badge, tapped on the image of a razor and metron, crossed. "This razor was given to me by a Monsieur Abelard, but it is not an ordinary razor. Instead of shaving hair, it lets me shave away what is improbable and leaves only the truth." He peered over the open case at Duhaime. "It tells me that you wrote a note with that pen and paper, and placed it on the statue of Reason in Descartes Square, and that we must therefore charge you with suspicion of kidnapping." Duhaime took an involuntary breath, confirming Louverture's suspicion. He took the day's paper from the case, showed the headline to Duhaime. It read *Feu dans le marché: deuxième du mois*. "Have you seen this? 'Manhunt for kidnapper.' You've cost a lot of time and trouble, Lucien."

"I didn't know anything about a kidnapping. I didn't know!" Duhaime tried to rise to his feet, was restrained by the chain fastening him to the table. "The man, he gave me three pieces of paper, said he'd pay if I delivered them for him. I thought it was a prank."

Louverture leaned back, rubbed his chin. "You've intrigued me, Lucien. Tell me about this man."

Duhaime shrugged, winced as he did so; Louverture saw his right shoulder was probably dislocated. "He was a rich man, well-dressed. A man like you."

"A policier?"

"No, a white."

"A convincing story requires more detail, Lucien," Louverture said, shaking his head sadly.

"He spoke well, though he was trying not to. Clean shaven, with a narrow face. He wore those little smoke-tinted glasses, so I didn't see his eyes."

"And just where did someone like you meet this wealthy, well-spoken man?"

"I have a pedicab. It's good money since the omnibuses started breaking down." Duhaime looked at Louverture's unbelieving eyes, then down at the table. "I stole it."

"Very well. Where did you pick him up?"

"On Baronne street, just west of the Canal. He was going to the ferry dock."

"Would you recognize him if you saw him again? Or a picture?"

"I'll try," Duhaime said, nodding eagerly.

Louverture closed his briefcase, rose to his feet. "Very well, Lucien, we shall test your theory," he said. "You'll remain our guest for the time being, and I'll see your shoulder gets looked at."

"Thank you, officier."

"It's nothing." Louverture turned to go, paused. "Oh, one thing more. You said you were given three copies: we found the one you planted on the statue, and one more you had. Where is the other?"

"I was to deliver one every night," Duhaime said.

"Where?"

"The statue, first; second the newspaper; and then Reason Cathedral."

"So you delivered the second last night? To the *Père Duchesne*?"

Duhaime shook his head. "No, sir. The other paper."

Louverture swore under his breath, turned to the door and knocked on it harshly. The gardien on the other side opened it and he stepped through; Clouthier was still standing there, by one of the portholes in the wall. "We have a problem," Louverture said. "The *Minerve* has a copy of the letter."

"I'll send a man—"

"It's probably too late. It would have been waiting for them this morning."

Clouthier rolled his eyes. "Assuming your man in there isn't just telling stories."

"He can't read," Louverture said, forcing his voice to stay level. "How do you suppose he wrote the letters? No, he's telling the truth—and by this afternoon everyone will know that 'she dies on the thirteenth.'"

"Perhaps it's a good thing," Clouthier said, shrugged. "It will make people alert; when he strikes, someone will see him and report it to us."

"It will make people panic. With an unfocused threat like this, we'll be sure to get mobs beating anyone they think is suspicious."

"In the poorer neighborhoods, maybe; we'll set extra patrols in them. But this is not Saint-Domingue, my friend: most of the people here are entirely too rational for that."

"I hope so," Louverture said. Something was nagging at him, some overlooked detail; it slipped away as he probed for it, like a loose tooth.

"At any rate, we still have plenty of time before the thirteenth of Fructidor. Let us hope all the attention doesn't cause our man to move up his timetable."

Louverture nodded, frowned. "Yes, that is strange. Nearly twenty days 'til then, but only three letters." He turned to the gardien by the door. "Have him moved to a holding cell, and see that his shoulder gets looked at."

The gardien looked from him to Clouthier, who gave a small nod.

"I'd best give the Commandant the news," Clouthier said, then tapped his cap and headed for the stairs.

Watching him go, Louverture wondered how much of his theory could be salvaged. If Duhaime was telling the truth—and Louverture felt sure he was—he had been right about the culprit having a confederate, but he was still left with the impossibility of the letter having been written and composed by the same man. He followed his line of thought up the stairs to his office. *When the inescapable conclusion of your assumptions seems impossible, he thought, question your assumptions.* His theory depended on at least one of the culprits desiring attention for his actions, and the letter to the *Minerve* certainly supported that; the *Père Duchesne* would not print it without approval from the Corps. If that was not the motive, though—or one of the motives—everything that followed from it changed; but what other motive could account for everything?

He opened the door to his office, saw four of Allard's sketches sitting on his desk. Two were the ones they had discussed, assuming a single culprit:

one version was white, one black. The other two, both white, were a split version of the first; the one had the physiognomy of a cautious, intelligent man, the second one emotional and impulsive. None of them much resembled anyone he had seen in the Rogues' Gallery volumes the night before. He looked the images over, wondering if any of them might be the man Duhaime said had hired him. The first two faces were like nobody he had ever seen, impossible configurations of rationality and impulsiveness; the fourth could be almost anyone. The third, though . . . he narrowed his eyes, imagining that man wearing smoke-tinted glasses. He looked a bit like Alard himself, or perhaps one of the men from Physical Sciences. Someone intelligent, certainly. Louverture tried to imagine what his next move would be. Did he know his messenger had been captured? If so, would he find another one, or would his purpose have been achieved with just the first two letters delivered? Would he be lying low or enjoying the chaos that the story in the *Minerve* would surely spark? No way to know without understanding his motive, and the more Louverture stared at the sketch the more he doubted that this man was seeking a thrill.

Louverture rolled up the sketches, his head starting to feel like a velodrome from the thoughts whizzing around in it. He was missing something, he knew that—some detail, just out of his reach—and he knew that chasing it around and around would not make it appear. Time to do things Clouthier's way: he would have photo-stats of the sketches made, give them to gardiens assigned to where Baronne crossed the canal and to the ferry dock. Perhaps he could even make some of those snickering stagieres pretend to be pedicab drivers, in hopes the culprit would come to them seeking another messenger. He imagined the man was too smart for that, but all it would cost was time and energy.

Cheered, Louverture headed off to the photo-stat room. Clouthier could hardly complain about this; just to be sure, he would take part in the stakeout himself—at the docks, he thought, where the breeze off the river would make the heat more tolerable. He would be sure to salute all the pedicab drivers dropping off their passengers.

Early the next morning Louverture sat up suddenly in bed, seized by a sudden thought. Two pieces that had not fit: *the thirteenth* and just three letters to be delivered. If he was right, the two together made up a very important piece indeed, but he could not be sure without a great deal of work—and books that were in the office. He dressed quickly, went downstairs and mounted his velocipede, riding through the empty streets in the dark. Fortunately the rest of the city was still asleep; absorbed as he was by the new lines of thought opening up, he would not have noticed an omnibus bearing down on him. As it was he nearly startled the night guard to death, suddenly appearing in the pool of light cast by the sodium lamps in Descartes Square and skidding to a stop mere meters from the door of the Cabildo. He flashed his badge and rushed up to his office. Hours of reading and calculation later he picked up the speaking tube to call Commandant Trudeau.

"Well, Louverture, here we are," Clouthier said when the three of them assembled, some minutes later, in Trudeau's office. "I take it you are going to tell us you've settled the case by doing figures all night?"

"Not the whole case, no, but I think you'll want to hear it. Tell me, *Officier principal*, do you know the old calendar at all?"

"The royal calendar, you mean? No, I never studied history. Why?"

"What day of the month is it by that reckoning, do you suppose?" Louverture asked.

"What does it matter?"

Trudeau was smiling, nodding to himself. "May I venture a guess, Officier Louverture?"

Louverture nodded magnanimously.

"Then if you are right, the timetable has been moved up—or rather, it was further along than we knew."

"What do you mean?" Clouthier said, frowning deeply; then, eyes widening, "Oh—so it is the thirteenth today, by that calendar? Of Thermidor, or of Fructidor?"

"Augustus," Trudeau said, with a glance at the bust on his desk. "Very good, Louverture, though I'm afraid this makes things a great deal more serious."

Clouthier ran his head over his shaved scalp. "But I don't understand. Even the English gave up that calendar years ago. Who would still use such an irrational system?"

"Irrationalists," Louverture said with a faint smile. "And the day is no coincidence, either. Thirteen was a very powerful number to pre-rational minds, associated with disaster. Whatever they have in mind may be bigger than even murder."

"You think it is the vodoun again, then? Is this all part of some irrational magic ritual?" Trudeau asked.

Louverture spread his hands. "I don't know. The number thirteen, the royal calendar—yes, that is common to all of those that hew to the old religions. But the letters, no. The vodoun, the Catholics, the Jews, they all rely on secrecy to go undetected."

"Perhaps the letter-writer is not a threat, but a warning? Someone inside this group who wishes to prevent whatever they are planning to do?"

"Then why not tell us more? And why the letters to the *Minerve*, and the cathedral?" Louverture chewed his lower lip. "If you'll pardon me, that is, Commandant."

Trudeau waved his objection away. "Of course, Officier. Speak freely."

"Moreover, we still have the reports from Graphology and Lombrosology. These tell us the letter-writer is an educated, rational man."

"How can he be a rational irrationalist?" Clouthier put in.

"How indeed?" Trudeau said. "It seems that we resolve one paradox only to create another."

"Commandant, I'm sure I can—"

"I'm sorry, Louverture," Trudeau said, putting up a hand. "Please do not take this as a lack of faith in you, but I am handing this matter over to Officier principal Clouthier. What you have discovered tells me that we must take immediate action."

"But we have no motive! No suspects!"

"We know where our suspects are," Clouthier said. "All the irrationalists—we know where they live, where they have their secret churches. We found your friend Lucien easily enough, didn't we?"

"But—"

"Officier Louverture, I'm told you've been here since one seventy-five. You've rendered great service to the Corps today, and you deserve a rest."

Louverture clamped his mouth shut, nodded. "Thank you, Comman-

dant," he managed to say. With a nod to each of his superiors he rose and left the room.

The sun was beating down outside, causing Louverture to realize he had forgotten his cap at home. His abandoned velocipede was gone, as well. Shading his eyes with his hands he quick-stepped across the square, then ducked into the café to pick up a *Minerve* and found a shady spot to wait for the omnibus. The headline, predictably, read *Elle meurt la treizième*; further down the page, another story trumpeted *Une autre sabotage aux théâtres: la Comédie Française ferme ses portes*. He folded the paper under his arm, unable to cope with any more irrationality. To whose benefit would it be to sabotage *all* the theaters, without asking for protection money?

"She's not coming," someone said. He turned to see an older black man in a white cotton shirt and pants, sweating profusely; he had obviously been walking a long way in the sun.

"I'm sorry?" Louverture said.

"The omnibus. She's not coming; broke down at Champs Elysées." The man shook his head. "Sorry, son," he said, and continued walking.

Louverture mouthed a curse, scanned the empty street for pedicabs. He supposed that driver had been right in thinking he would be out of a job soon. It was almost like an experiment to see how often buses could break down before people stopped taking them, the way people had stopped going to the theaters. . . .

A terrible, inescapable thought hit him. Desperate to disprove it, Louverture set out at a run. His face was red by the time he arrived at the theater, a very hot half-kilometer away; he banged on the stage door with a closed fist, catching his breath.

"We're closed," a voice came from inside.

"Corps de commande," Louverture said. He imagined he could hear the man inside sighing as he opened up.

"What can I do for you?" the man said. He was tall, about a hundred and eighty centimeters, with a long face and a deeply receding hairline, wearing black pants and turtleneck. He was quite incidentally blocking the doorway he had just opened.

"May I come in?"

The man's eyes narrowed as he stepped aside. "You say you're with the corps?"

Louverture realized that he was wearing neither his cap nor his uniform, and that his hair was showing. He took out his badge, showed it to the man. "Officier de la paix Louverture. And you are?"

"Gaetan. Gaetan Tremblay. I'm the stage manager. At least . . ."

Stepping inside, Louverture nodded, held up his copy of the *Minerve*. "What can you tell me about last night?"

"The cyclorama dropped," Tremblay said. "That's the backdrop that—"

"I know. Was anyone hurt?"

"No—but with all that's happened at the other theaters, people just panicked."

"May I see?"

Tremblay led him down the black, carpeted hallway to the backstage

entrance, lit the halogens that hung above. In the pool of light that appeared, Louverture could see the fallen cloth, as wide as the stage, gathered around a thick metal pole that sat on the ground. A slackened rope still extended from the far end of the pole to the fly gallery above; the rope from the near end was severed, lying in a loose coil on the floor. "We lowered the intact side so it wouldn't fall unexpectedly," Tremblay said.

Louverture picked up the snapped rope, ran it through his fingers until the end reached him. The strands were all the same length, except for one, and only that one had stretched and frayed. "Has anyone examined this?"

Tremblay shook his head. "I told them it was an accident, but you know how superstitious actors are."

"That will be all I need, then," Louverture said, and waited for Tremblay to lead him back out the maze of corridors.

"Officier," Tremblay said when they reached the door, "do you think if we close for a while—the people, will they—"

"Forget?" Louverture pushed the door open, blinked at the light outside. "Of course. With enough time, people can forget anything."

His mind raced as he ran back to the Cabildo. A paradox was not a dead end, he had forgotten that: it was an intersection of two streets you hadn't known existed. He smelled sulphur as he reached the square, saw smoke rising from near the courthouse. The gardien at the door leveled a pistol at him as he neared.

"Keep back, please," the gardien said.

Louverture raised his hands. He could not recall if he had ever seen a gardien draw his gun before. "I'm Officier Louverture," he said, slowly dropping his right hand. "I'm reaching for my badge." He fished it out carefully, extended it at arm's length.

"Go in, then," the gardien said, "and you might want to get a spare uniform if you're staying."

"What's going on?"

"A bomb. In the courthouse."

"Sweet Reason. Was anyone killed?"

The gardien shook his head. "It missed fire, or else it was just a smoke bomb—but they found two more just like it at the Cathedral and the Academie Scientifique."

"Excuse me," Louverture said, waving his badge at the desk man as he went inside.

"Louverture!" Commandant Trudeau said, looking up from the charts on his desk. "I told Clouthier you wouldn't be able to stay away." Clouthier, his back to Louverture, nodded absently. "Quite a mess, isn't it?"

"Commandant—Officier principal—I think I understand it now," he said. "I think I know who is doing this."

"Which group of irrationalists?"

"Not irrationalists; scientists. It's an *experiment*."

Trudeau looked confused, the first time Louverture had seen it on his face. "Explain."

"A series of larger and larger experiments. The theater accidents, the omnibus failures—they were done on purpose, to test how much it takes

to change people's behavior. The notes, and the bomb probably too—they were to test us."

"Test us for what?"

"To see how much it would take to make us react irrationally, see every accident as sabotage, every abandoned briefcase as a bomb. Perhaps we too are just a test for a larger experiment."

"But the notes," Clouthier said, turning to face him. "Who were they threatening?"

Louverture glanced out the window, at the statue in the middle of the square. "Reason," he said. "*She* dies tonight."

"I'm sorry, Officier, but this makes no sense," Trudeau said. "What would be the motive?"

"I'm not sure. Jealousy, a wish to possess reason for themselves alone? Or perhaps the motive is reason itself. Perhaps they simply want to *know*."

"This is ridiculous," Clouthier barked. "He wants us chasing phantoms. We know who the irrationalist leaders are; arrest them, and the others will follow soon enough."

"And how will people react when they see the Corps out in force, with pistols? Will they remain rational, do you think?"

"I've ordered a couvre-feu for eight o'clock," Clouthier said. "People will stay inside when they see the lights are out."

Louverture closed his eyes. "As you say."

"Will you join us, Louverture?" Trudeau said, his attention back on the maps on the desk. "We can use another man, especially tonight."

"Is that an order, Commandant?"

There was a long pause; then Trudeau very carefully said, "No, Officier, it isn't. Go home and get your rest—go *quickly*, and show your badge if anyone questions you."

"Thank you, sir."

Louverture went down the stairs, pushed through the gardiens assembling in the lobby; noticed Pelletier, saluted him. Pelletier did not answer his salute; perhaps the boy did not recognize him without his cap and uniform, and at any rate he was talking to the gardiens stagieres around him. Not wanting to interrupt, Louverture stepped outside.

The sun was nearly down, but the air was still hot; Reason's torch cast a weak shadow on the number eight. Heading for Danton Street, Louverture saw a man approaching across the square. He was wearing a dark wool suit, despite the weather; a top hat and smoke-tinted glasses.

Louverture looked the man in the eyes as he neared, trying to read him; the man cocked his head curiously and gazed back at him. The two of them circled each other slowly, eyes locked. When they had exchanged positions, the man doffed his hat to Louverture, his perfectly calm face creased with just a hint of a smile, and then turned and did the same to the statue of Reason. Louverture knew that look: it was the one Allard wore while measuring a skull. The man found an empty bench, sat down and waited, as though he expected a show to unfold in front of him at any moment.

The bells in the Cathedral of Reason rang out eight o'clock, and the sodium lamps in the square faded to darkness. The lights were going out all over town; Louverture did not suppose he would see them lit again. ○

SCIENCE FICTION SUDOKU

This month's SF Sudoku puzzle, the subject of which was suggested by sudoku contest runner-up Sheryl Kolar, is solved using the letters BEIJPTUY. Place a letter into each box so that each row across, each column down, and each small nine-box square within the larger diagram (there are nine of these) will contain each of these letters. No letter will appear more than once in any row, column, or smaller nine-box square. The solution is determined through logic and the process of elimination. Beneath the puzzle is a set of ten blanks. Rearrange the following letters for an SF work: B, E, I, J, P, R, T, U, U, and Y. The answers for the Sudoku puzzle and the anagram can be found beneath our classified ads on page 143. The solution to each puzzle is independent of the other. We've inverted the answer to the anagram so that you don't come upon it by accident.

E	P			R	Y			
	I		J			Y	T	
		T		U				R
P			I		U		R	
T		U				I		E
	R		Y		E			B
R				Y		U		
	U	J			P		Y	
			U	B			P	J

THE SANGUINE

Jim Grimsley

In his wrenching new tale, Jim Grimsley deftly disturbs the calm surface of "The Sanguine." The author's most recent book, *The Last Green Tree*, was released from Tor Books late last year. It ties together some of the threads begun in such earlier *Asimov's* stories as "Into Greenwood" (September 2001), "Perfect Pilgrim" (February 2003), and "The 120 Days of Sodom" (February 2005). In other news, Jim tells us that he has a cameo in the movie version of his mainstream book, *Dream Boy*.

On his early morning turn through the park, fretful about the day to come, Morgan shoved his hands in his pockets. A cool breeze not yet touched with sun blew off the Chattahoochee; later the early summer heat would come. Rarely did he walk alone, inside or outside, and today was no exception; he was attended by one of the guards from the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals, Tang Tu-Li, a burly young woman dressed like an athlete out for a morning jog—warm-ups, headband, heart monitor, and expensive running shoes. She followed at a discreet distance but every time he glanced her way, there was her gaze on him, careful and measured. She knew her business, this one.

Like most mornings, winter or summer, he crossed Meteor Park on the walking path, over the stone bridge, along the riverfront, and back along Chersey Street to home. He liked his walk and never felt hurried. His schedule was easy, no more than one client per day, since these days he worked only with the most difficult cases. He had ample time to drift along the riverwalk and watch the passenger ferries pulling in at the dock. New-Atlan stretched along the river, bright, glittering, endlessly tall, the bustle of the morning beginning, lines of helicopters snaking toward the various helipads on the tops of skyscrapers, streams of traffic crossing the bridge. The knowledge that his work, however difficult, was part of this endless pattern of movement reassured him, never better than at an early hour, well before seven A.M., when the world was tinged

with a sense of a new beginning, a morning that might be the start of anything.

Tang the bodyguard controlled an outlying flycam that surveyed the route, which varied slightly day to day but in general followed the same path, a loop leading from Chersey uptown along the park, around Meteor Lake, and back along the bike path to the river. The complexity of surface streets and the fact that New-Atlan was mostly closed to vehicle traffic near the park made it possible for Morgan to switch his route at whim, and so he was never an easy target should someone actually have tried to kidnap him or worse—a possibility in these troubled times, the year Fourteen, soon after the end of the chaos.

But he formed part of the solution to the chaos and not part of the problem, as he saw it, and therefore it was unlikely that anyone would try to harm him. Morning after morning he was proven right, arriving home in time for a listen to the weather and a look at the digest of headlines floating above the jector.

He had a fairly modest apartment in the Federal Security Compound, provided for him as part of his compensation package; he saw his recall clients there. Most were war criminals or betrayers of good order of some other type as defined by the Southern Tier Government. They were people to be held responsible for the turbulent times out of which the world had only recently, and only partially, emerged. Today, though, would be an exception to his usual work with criminals, almost a relief, if he thought about it. Still, he felt a certain amount of apprehension.

A week ago had come the prompt from the regional office of the medical bureau overseeing human memory management that Morgan was due for his own annual recall. The news came as a shock to him; part of a memory alteration of any kind was the hardwiring to forget it for fifty-one weeks out of the year.

"So today I get to feel what my patients feel," he said, and Tang looked confused, as if uncertain whether to answer. Morgan rarely spoke to her, familiar as she was. She was part of the comfortable present, as were all the rest; Chuck Ipsis who was currently by the front door and Lex Nemov who would replace Tang this afternoon; there were more, and he could have remembered them, each name, had he wished.

The memory dump—delivery of the neural storage wafers in their refrigerated canister—came precisely on schedule. The process was still referred to as a dump even though these days a memory was never transmitted over the public net, or over any sort of net. Memory was stored as living protein at a central location, copied, and transferred as a protein wafer to be softened with a solution and applied to the client's external receptor cells. It was treated as precious cargo.

Even today the data arrived from the central cache by certified courier accompanied by a small platoon of armed guards, though in this case the precautions were a courtesy to Morgan. Usually he handled the memory box with studied casualness, but today he felt the weight of the cool cube when the guard handed it over. He confirmed the code on the unit carefully and chatted with the delivery detail like always. Some days the

guards came from the Corporation for Christ security forces, dull green fatigues with a hint of a camouflage pattern. Today's guards were Southern Tier, Lieutenant Jacobs and his unit in uniforms of a dun color. Jacobs's people set up in their usual locations throughout the apartment and Morgan realized that these preparations were exactly the same as usual, even though his client for today was not a war criminal or prisoner of the state. Today's client was Morgan himself, restoring blocked memories from his own life.

"Why all the fuss?" he asked Marla Sinjnovc, the Regional District Something-or-Other who had come in that morning for an unannounced visit. She apparently planned to handle his recall herself.

"You might get upset, even violent, when we restore your memories. You know that."

"Not to the point that you need the army, for Christ's sake—"

"It's a courtesy, Morgan. You're a memory specialist and you need a recall yourself. You'll be vulnerable the whole time you're recovering. This is a sign of respect."

"It still makes no sense—I mean, why bring you into this, for instance, you're the regional—whatever."

She was doing her usual trick of avoiding eye contact. He always found her irritating; some association with some memory he couldn't bring up at the moment, perhaps.

"You ask the same thing every year." She had set up her portable dogcase in line with the rest of the servers in his stack and was busy tending to queues of this and that in her tank-state. She had a distracted look, her eyes focused on her inner frames and screens. He liked it better in the old days when people wore glasses or goggles for that kind of work. She continued to speak without looking at him, but she was a bit breathless, agitated. "And every year, like clockwork, I say, trust me, you'll want the fuss before the day is out."

"But you even have Jennie here. She's a psychometrician, for god's sake, I don't need mood adjustment."

"Of course you don't. I've known you a long time, Morgan. I know how to manage your recall."

"Then why do you seem upset?"

She flushed. "I'm not upset. There are things on my mind."

"The regional office."

She gave him an odd look, and a moment later clearly lied to him about something, but he couldn't tell what. "Things are fine there," she said, but with that tightness to the upper lip that meant she was speaking falsely for some reason.

Why would he know that she clenched her upper lip when she fibbed? She hardly ever came for one of her drop-ins these days.

He spoke mostly in irritation as she fiddled with the coded latch on the memory box. "I don't know why I need to do this anyway, I'm perfectly fine with whatever nips and tucks have been performed on my internal connections."

"You didn't have memory bypass, you had dysjunction. And here's where you say—"

"What on earth are you talking about, dysjunction, why would I do that?"

She looked at him without the usual cool distance, touched her tinted hair distractedly. Her nails were each glowing in myriad colors, a fashionable new fluorescent gelatin treatment that also strengthened the aging tissue. Advertisements for it saturated the virtuum. "You'll know why when you do your restore. What do you tell your clients when they ask you that question?"

"I tell them that removal of traumatic and psycho- or sociopathological memories is a great palliative but the original bearer of those memories is required by law and by good scientific practice to restore them at least once a year. But what am I—what did I—oh, I sound like one of my own patients." He even sat, without thinking, in the patient's chair, since Marla, behind his desk, had already claimed the ExecutiveComfort Vertimax that was all the new rage from Herman Miller. "I'll know when I know. Why are you here, anyway?"

"A doctor who treats himself. You know."

"I don't have a fool for a patient, I can take care of this myself."

"You say that every year, too."

"Why don't I remember any of this? I mean, I know why, but it's frustrating to sit here and know that I do actually go through this scene with you or somebody every year, and I don't have the slightest clue about it."

She was tidily tucking away her transmitter into the dogcase. All of her attention was now focused on him. What frightened him was that her look was suddenly tender. "You go through this scene with me," she said. "Every year. I don't give your case to anyone else."

"You know that none of this is reassuring, it's actually more frightening to hear you say things like that."

"I know. There's no cure for it but to remember what you have to remember. Are you ready?" She was actually shaking a bit as she held his memory patch between thumb and forefinger. The square looked for all the world like the piece of communion wafer the preacher used to slip under his tongue back in the days when the Baptists went high church.

In fact it was a series of protein codes, a series of ten small squares, that he would ingest through a patch behind his ear. She was dropping a solution that would turn the square to a paste his receptor could absorb. The proteins contained certified copies of memories excised from him and stored in the secured central cache for the Fifth Circuit district. Memory excision was generally carried out under a court order. Why had he or anyone else sought a court order in his case? As she applied the first patch to him, his heart started to pound and a feeling of dread weighted him to the seat.

"I think I did something terrible," he said.

She was looking at him with tears in her eyes. He was right, he had done something awful. What had happened? And then he began to know. The texture of the past changed inside him as he watched her.

"I'll now inform you under Federal Law of the Territory of the Southern Tier Government that you are under surveillance by a qualified Sanguine and if you attempt to resist these memories or to react to them violently you will be duly restrained under the code. . . ."

He was sweating and shaking. Her voice softened, though she could not vary from her legal script since their actions, their images, their voices, were now being recorded by his own staff.

"Morgan Durban Alexei Horton, I am required by law to inform you that on this date in August in the last year of the Great Collapse, you were found guilty of manslaughter of your two sons and later, under court directive, sentenced to memory excision as a preventative to suicide; so ordered by the county of FuKalb in the Territory of the Southern Tier at the request of your wife—"

Her voice had begun to shake, and she was sitting with tears in her eyes, controlled in every other way. The memory had begun to take hold and he knew at the same moment that she said—

"Your wife Marla Sinjnovc." She had apparently doubted her ability to get through the speech and had taken the trouble to print out a script on an old fashioned card that she held in front of her, hand trembling. The card appeared to have seen a lot of use. She looked at him. "That would be me," she said. "That's part of the excision. We were married, Morgan, you and I. But you've forgotten."

"I know," he said, and he remembered everything and his heart tore all over again.

The memory was from the days of the earthquake along the New Madrid fault in the midwestern United States. The disaster there had plunged the old United States of America government into a chaos that finally broke the country into pieces. For Morgan, sitting in his married student housing in Minnesota, reading for his finals in memory management science by candlelight, trudging miles to the university to study in the library, watching his hungry children as the country collapsed into civil war, the days had been filled with a grinding horror. He had been married to Marla at the time but he could feel less of her in the memory than he should, even at its beginning. At first he could find nothing of his sons, but that was not unusual; restored memories took some time to unfold.

In his current, present life as a Sanguine, the odd name that had come to be applied to a memory specialist, he remembered the Great Collapse as an abstraction, events that he had barely witnessed. As the reality of the memories flooded into him, Marla applying wafer after wafer to the moist, greedy patch behind his ear, he felt himself shaking, trying to knit together a past he had obviously not been able to endure when it was his own.

"Why do they make me do this?"

"Don't your patients ask you the same question?" Marla asked, sniffing, reaching for a tissue from his desk.

"Yes. But most of my patients are criminals."

"That's nice. Most of mine aren't. You remember now, right? I'm not really your irritating regional supervisor who drops in unannounced, I haven't worked for the government in a long time. These days I'm your ex-wife who visits you once a year. I'm the one who remembers our children every day." Some of her agitation was passing now. She stood with the tissue clutched in her fist and walked to his window looking out over the city, for all the world like some movie heroine doing her big scene.

What did he tell his patients? Take long, deep breaths and let the memories settle. Remember, this is not who you are or who you will be tomorrow; this is someone you used to be. These memories don't belong to you any more. They belong to the you of yesterday, not to the you of today.

"Now I understand why they call us Sanguines," he said. "It's a bloody mess in my head right now."

"I thought it was because we're such tangible optimists, curing the world's problems by allowing people to forget the hard parts."

They'd had this discussion before. He remembered and smiled. "How's private practice?"

"Tedious. I make a lot of money."

"Still doing criminal cases?"

"Court-ordered memory tracing. I don't do excisions any more. I hate them too much."

He blew his nose, found his legs shaky when he tried to stand.

Tell the patient: Don't think about the harder memories at first. Realize that you had two sons, two children. Hold back their names for a moment, while the memories are reassembling; just realize you had two sons once, a long time ago, as if it were a pleasant thing. Slowly breathing, watching the treetops over the park below his office window, the clouds sweeping in and shading the leafy surface, another storm coming. After a while he could start to search for a face, Joshua, and a face, Brock, but faces were complicated and wore out; those parts of the memories tended to remain fuzzy, hazy.

"Are you doing the breathing?" she asked. "Like a good client?"

"I'm trying." He sniffed again, reached for another tissue. "Did you bring pictures? I can't remember what the boys looked like."

A spasm of pain, not performed or movie-like but real, crossed her expression. "Sometimes it's like a movie script we play out every year. You ask for things in almost the same order."

"It's because I can't remember their faces, it's the first thing that occurs to you. It's what my clients ask me for and most of them are psychopaths. Were psychopaths. They want pictures of their victims, or their moms."

She snapped at him in a way that he remembered, her reaction to the unfamiliar, the uncomfortable, from their married days. "Why do you like working with these creeps anyway?"

He shook his head. "Not now."

She had been searching through her dogcase the whole while. "Here's the flat I want, the pictures are here. The same ones I bring every year. Just thumb it at the bottom. I can't watch this part, I'll be in the other room."

So much rushed through him as he sat and held the frame. She had married him while they were at the University of Georgia doing preliminary neo-med training for their future careers as Sanguines. Later they had a house with white walls and peeling paint, the kitchen curtains yellow, windows over the old fashioned twentieth century sink. They lived in St. Paul, Minnesota, so that they could do pre-Sanguinal training with Vincent Pradwhi at Cederson; they lived on a street with a big, twisted oak, its branches gouged out in a perfect partial circle from the side for

the power lines that still ran along the street. At times it looked as if a moon were eating the canopy of the tree. His son Joshua had sandy hair with pale green eyes the color of the newest, youngest blade of grass imaginable. Brock was heavy for a three-year-old and Marla worried about his weight because he would not ride his blue Raleigh Racer tricycle even in the house. The bedroom Marla shared with Morgan danced with a shimmery light when there was snow on the ground. After the boys were dead, Marla put on a lot of weight and sat in the kitchen where she could still hear them sometimes, she said, as if they were playing in the back room. Bits and snatches, momentary images, came to him while he sat in his present-day high-rise apartment holding the frame of the past in his hand.

That he had loved Marla, the memory of the love, came back to him before the love itself. Other images came with that, shaking him so that at moments he could hardly breathe, doubled over onto the emptiness in his gut. Her face, the curve of her cheek, the line of her neck in a certain kind of soft light, the forming and reforming of her neat, round buttocks when she walked naked into some other room; maybe his college dorm room, when they were first dating, or her room at the sorority when he sneaked upstairs to see it, awful pink checked curtains at the windows her mother had made. So this was where his smugness, his ease with his present life came from: it was a scab over the wound of what he might have been if the earthquake had never happened, if he had not watched his sons starving, if he had not decided to drive to the local food center, if there had not been snow, if he had not been upset, if he had not been drunk. . . .

"What about my prison sentence?" he asked, when Marla came back into the room. He had finished with the picture frame, handed it back to her. She collapsed it to something the size of a matchstick and put it into her dogcase.

"It's somewhere in those wafers I gave you. That memory doesn't usually resurface for a while and you don't have much to remember. After the trauma care you were suicidal and drugged most of the time. We put you in a psych hospital."

"Where?"

"Dorothea Dix in Raleigh, near your parents."

"That's when you decided about my memory—"

"Your parents suggested it. They said they thought if we took away the memory of the bad time you would heal. So we all went to court."

He swallowed, fingers loosely laced together in his lap. He felt bleak and drained. In a few more minutes the memories would start to fade; recalls worked best when kept short and cathartic, according to Laslow and the other gurus of memory science.

He asked, pretending to be calm, "When did you divorce me?"

She had sat back in his comfortable desk chair, hair a mess, eyes swollen. "Christ. I don't know if I can keep doing this every year, Morgie. It makes it even worse that you forget so completely every time."

"This is what we do to our patients every day without blinking."

"I know." She shook her head. "It's a bloody business, all right, making

people remember what they couldn't live with in the first place. I wish I had a cigarette." She had claimed the habit as her own as soon as cigarettes were made cancer-safe, before the civil wars. Reclining in a Jacuzzi in frozen Minnesota with a scotch in one hand and a cigarette in the other. Standing in the cold outside her sorority, smoking because her roommate was a priss about the smell. He shook his head, focused on the woman in the chair. "You asked me for a divorce," she said. "Just before you drove off in the car. I had no idea the boys were with you. You were so drunk."

"Why didn't you know where the boys were?"

"We didn't know. Either of us. They'd crawled into the back seat of the car to get away from the sound of our fight. We were fighting."

"Wait a minute. Wait a minute. I still don't remember any of this."

"You were almost killed in that car, too, Morgie. It's a trauma memory. There's usually a gap."

The nimbus around her was coming to a peak, not even noon yet, and he loved her as much as he ever had. But if it was part of the memory it would fade, too, and within a few more minutes he would think of her in the old way, as his distant associate, not really very relevant to his life. The same line of her neck in that same soft light made him want to touch the skin there, one fingertip along the tiny creases.

She looked him in the eye and knew what he was feeling; that much was plain from her own posture, somehow defeated and dissolving. She loved him, too, and he felt it across the room, without a sound, as she watched. There was a crack in the world and it ran through them, it had taken their children. But that had nothing to do with the fact that he pulsed with feeling for her still, even now, seeing her aged and different.

"I don't know why I wanted to divorce you but it had to have been a mistake," he said. "I love you so much."

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Her face creased in the center as a face will do when it wants to clench a painful emotion, contain it, refuse to let it display. She broke in half visibly but rigidly, refusing to move. "Don't say it," she shook her head. "You won't remember the rest. You won't remember why you wanted a divorce." She wiped her eyes on her hands, like a girl, sitting with her feet splayed inward, toes of her shoes touching. "That's part of the gap. I always have to tell you."

"What?"

"You wanted a divorce because I was cheating on you. I was having an affair." For a moment she was clearly studying him, assessing him for body signs, looking over his monitors, glancing at the cameras for a moment as if to remind herself of the filming, of the silent witnesses. How many times had this staff or another filmed this scene or one like it? Did Marla keep the digitals in one of her frames?

What she'd told him refused to register.

"Did you hear me?" she asked.

"Yes."

She spread her fingers over the arms of the chair. Her nails were still glimmering. Confession had stilled her and she was beginning to show signs of calm.

His fingers and toes were tingling and his mouth felt dry. "It's starting to wear off," he said.

"Your toes?" she asked, handing him water.

"And fingers."

She nodded.

"Things could be different," he said, heart thudding. "I still love you. Do I usually say that?"

She shook her head.

"We could see each other now. In our new lives. I know they can't put the memories back in but people learn to live with that anyway."

She looked at him, softening as he watched. Had they not been in the eye of several cameras, he might have touched her. But his thirst was strong again and she poured him more water and something about the taste of the water blurred her, made him less certain of what he saw.

"I don't care what you did," he said, mopping his forehead with a tissue. "I mean it."

"You're sweating," she said, arranging her own hair. "It won't be long now."

"Tell me you'll try," he said. "Tell me we can try again."

"I'll try. Sure." But she was motionless, watching him. "You really are an optimist. Who knew?"

A last image of Brock, dissolving into the dark. An image of Joshua, face crushed between the back and front seats of a car. Deep inside him came a moment of tearing so awful, so thorough, he would never cross to the other side of it.

"I don't care what you did or who he was," he said, and she looked at him a last time just as he was closing his eyes. "We could be happy."

In the sleep that followed he was certain he would wake and find her

with him. The boys would be outside playing in the yard. There would be food to eat and no argument and Marla would not have that guilty, sneaky look she'd had for so long. The earth in Kansas and Iowa and Missouri would knit itself back together and there would be one country instead of three. The Horton family would be whole and Morgan would get his exams done and Marla would not need to talk about that doctor she was training with or mope around the house neglecting Morgan in favor of daydreaming. In the sleep that followed, he was certain everything would be all right again, his life would knit itself back into a whole, and his brain would take the shape it used to have before the memories leaked out of it onto those communion wafers.

But after a while there was no name for that woman he was thinking of and there was no time to which he wanted to return. What was left were scraps of memory that lingered and pulsed forward, shifting into one another, too abrupt to be hallucinogenic, more like a movie stuttering before it stops.

Morgan Durban Alexei Horton came to himself on the patient's chair of his office and looked out the window, where clouds had gathered. He felt shaken and drained and, as he did every year, he wondered what it was he had remembered in the recall. The echoes of the feelings remained. Soon even his memory that this procedure had happened would fade; and he would live another year blissfully unaware that he had ever been part of any other life than this. But Marla Sinjnovc—why was he thinking about her? Why was he afraid she was sad?

Tang, the bodyguard from this morning, came to the office door as he was stirring from the chair. She gave him the sort of once-over one gives to an invalid or a person who has just lost a close relative. "Do you need anything, Dr. Horton?"

"Dr. Sinjnovc. Did she leave?"

"Yes, sir. Right after the procedure."

"Did she seem upset?"

Tang hesitated, her chin dimpling slightly. "More so than usual, yes, sir. I think it's appropriate that I say that much."

"Do you know what memory she shows me?"

"No, sir. Are you remembering something from the session, sir, are you having a residual, because I could call—"

He shook his head. "No, nothing wrong. The recording of this session. Does she take it with her?"

"Yes. Every year I've been here." Tang was getting uncomfortable so he nodded and turned to let her know that she could go. Remembering this morning, he attempted no undue familiarity. He shuffled the frames and packets on his desk.

The thought made him feel warm, that Marla was watching the tape, was watching him remember and forget. Why did it please him? What was Marla to him, after all? But still, maybe if she were to call him, or maybe if he were to call her. . . .

He gave the empty memory box to his assistant, telling her to double-wipe the code to make sure his information was erased. The rest of the day he spent on his orchid garden. By evening he had only a hazy inkling that

the procedure had happened. That night he spoke to an associate on the hard-line and actually said, in all seriousness, "I don't even think we knew about the Great Collapse where I grew up. I hardly remember a thing."

In bed in the wee hours he dreamed a sandy-haired boy was leading him to the top of a slight rise, the path folded over with leaves and branches, the crest of the hill all awash with glow under the green canopy. The boy leading Morgan was eager but careful and kept looking back at Morgan with complete, utter tenderness. "Come on," said the boy, "when we get to the top of the hill you'll see. Brock's there."

But he never came to the top of the hill in the dream, he kept walking as his feet got heavier and the ground slipped back and the sandy-haired boy whose name Morgan could not remember appeared more and more frightened. His hand slipped away and Morgan stepped off the path into the tangled trees and was lost and could not breathe and woke up, looking at the flat, square windows of his bedroom.

The next morning on his turn through the park, Morgan remembered to bring gloves. The sky was lightening and clear birdcalls rose over Meteor Park.

Tang had come with him again, chin tucked in, studying the dry grass, her manner reserved and distant, showing no hint of yesterday.

"This morning's client should be interesting," he said.

"Who is it?"

"A pervert. A sexual offender of the child molesting type. They get violent when they realize who they used to be." Morgan smiled, though he was not even looking in Tang's direction. "Maybe it's a sign things are getting better. We're back to the ordinary run of human filth and vice. Not so many war criminals any more."

Tang looked very reserved for a moment, then stared at the ground and something changed in her manner. "Do you remember what you asked me yesterday?"

"No. Not really. By tonight I won't remember yesterday at all, I'll go back to my base memory completely."

"You wanted to know whether Dr. Sinjnovc seemed upset."

"I remember now, yes."

"She said something when she left. She said you didn't follow the script this year, not at the end. I'm not even sure she was really talking to me."

"I didn't follow the script?" A happy feeling flooded him, suddenly. Why? He could hardly bear Marla Sinjnovc's company even for a morning, she was vapid. So why this feeling, that he was pleased at having surprised her?

For a moment he could almost see her younger, standing somewhere in the ice and snow, like something from a fairy tale, smoke or mist drifting around her head.

"I don't know why they make me go through a recall anyway," he said after a while, his heartbeat settling, his breathing relaxed. "I'm fine. What could there be for me to remember?"

Tang turned away, neither embarrassed nor comfortable, simply herself.

"A little hope," she said, in that placid way of hers, and he found himself wondering, then and after, what she had meant. ○

THEY ARRIVED

They arrived the way we do
on the commuter rail:
suited strangers on their way to work
with finny fingers and blue complexions
as if the poisons drifting through Boston Bay
forced them finally up for air
and for jobs on land.

"What do you do, buddy?" I asked one.

"I'm part of an invasion force," he said;

"we conquer alien civilizations."

I thought it sounded like quite the task
and said so. "Like yours," he added.

I only nodded

having heard the story.

The way so many others had been before
these folk from the Bay are too smart
and have too many of their own concerns
when six o'clock rolls around—
beer gardens, private dinners,
even catching a couple films—
to be too efficient at what they do
over the long haul.

Still, some have admirable industry
and whole boroughs, I hear, lie conquered.

I wake some mornings expecting to hear
the bugle call to defense

but hear only a few dogs barking,
probably at themselves,

and the rolling of the commuters.

Sometimes a week will roll by
without my catching a glimpse of an invader
mowing a lawn or weighing down a park bench
although somewhere or other I feel sure
the conquest rolls on.

—Mark Rich

Colin P. Davies has just completed his first novel, a comic fantasy for young adults. Further details about it are available on his website, www.colinpdavies.com. The author's previous story for us, "The Defenders" (October/November 2004), resurfaced in *The Year's Best SF* #22. More recently, many of his tales have appeared in the online 'zine, *Bewildering Stories*. In his newest story for our pages, he takes us far into a future where we can attempt to interpret . . .

BABEL 3000

Colin P. Davies

Unbeknownst to Smith, archaic words had become cool.

"Nicola . . ." he protested. "You're making that word up."

The blonde girl's cheeks flared crimson and she was clearly befuddled. She leaned her bicycle against the crumbling bark of a naked oak tree.

"Honest Guv . . . I ain't. I . . . I heard it only yesterday. My boyfriend hooked it in London, 1236 AD."

"And it's definitely a *must have*?" He removed his trilby and glanced about to ensure they were alone here this morning on the banks of the river.

"You'll be cooler than an Argentinian penguin farmer." She laughed. Her fingers fought with the breeze to keep her shoulder-length hair out of her doll-perfect face.

"I thought Japanese words were current."

"Keep up, Smithy! Fatima used an archaic, totally unknown word on *Lunchtime Debate*, two days ago. Now everybody wants one."

Smith was reluctant to part with his credit—it was a novel weight on his spreadsheet. But still . . . a new *old* word! Maybe he could use it at Jenny's millennium dinner party tonight.

"I'm telling you, Señor Smithy. No one else has got it yet." She tugged on her white T-shirt so that he could not miss the word **UNIQUE** stretched across her chest. "My boyfriend has the best ear, and the best gear, for time-fishing. He's sharp, sly. Bit of a geek."

Smith recalled how his wife, Mary, had loved that word . . . geek. He was a geek for collecting hats. He was a geek for choosing to cook. She'd been dead nine years now and he still missed being a geek.

Nicola moved towards him. With her confident hips and assured shoulders, her casual, almost careless style—evidenced by the yellow trousers

complete with bicycle clips—Nicola reminded him of Mary. He wondered why he'd not seen it before.

"Okay," he said. "I'll take it." The girl had not let him down yet. Every word she'd sold him had been received with admiration and applause, whether literary, educational, technical . . . whatever. He'd come to trust her, and to look forward to their meetings. Indeed, today, after she'd called to make the arrangement, he'd immediately showered and chosen a sharp charcoal suit he had not worn in nine years.

They touched fingertip terminals. The credit transfer was swift and Smith experienced the usual sherbet fizz in his left temple. "Lodged and logged. I feel positively medieval."

"Thanks, Mister."

Mister? Yes . . . he was twice her age. "On your way, Lass. And. . . ." He pressed his hat back onto his bald head and turned up his coat collar. "And wrap up warmer."

Smith watched Nicola pedal off on her bicycle while he reflected on the speed of change. He'd only recently adapted to the fashion for Japanese jargon following months of entrepreneurial claptrap. And now this. It seemed the world had grown old while he'd slept.

"Jenny." Smith hugged the tall, elegant lady and kissed her naked earlobe.

"Smithy. . . ." She snaked an arm around his shoulders, reached up and cheekily dislodged his top hat.

"I've got something for everyone to hear," he said quietly, taking the hat in hand. "At the end of the main course." He noted that her scarlet, off-the-shoulder, silk gown carried the word *erudite* in gold and in a variety of sizes and fonts. She could possibly be the most stylish host in Cambridge. She was certainly the most industrious—this was her fourth millennium party and they were only halfway through January.

"Angelina also has a word, Smithy. Can yours wait till after that?" She helped him out of his overcoat.

"Indubitably. No rush." Fashions changed fast, but not usually during the course of a formal dinner.

However, he soon noted that most guests were attired in red, whilst he had opted for a black kimono. Tomorrow he would re-subscribe to the lifestyle channel.

Later, as he polished off his four-seasons pizza, Smith was disturbed to see the Holy Anderson rise to speak. The sensei's gaze flitted about like a butterfly, alighting on guest after guest, freezing each for a moment's examination. He was canny, this priest. He would first still the conversation and then drop in his word like a fox into a hen house. This time, however, he held back. "I give way to the delectable Angelina," he said.

"Thanks, Dad." The exceedingly short young lady coughed as her eyes appeared over the rim of the table. "This word is deep, so think about it and *weep*." A murmur sneaked around the table. Angelina coughed again. "Are we ready?" Silence.

"Asinine!"

Anderson's claps were small explosions of delight. Jenny and the guests followed suit. Smith merely gulped with relief. Not a new old word. Not

even a rare word. She'd gone for a *just right* word. Undeniably deep . . . and poignant, with the memory of her mother's refusal to learn the off-worlders' tongue, and her subsequent incarceration, still fresh and painful. He had to admire the little gnome.

"Bird-brained!" came a call from amongst the guests.

Angelina aimed a sour look at the culprit.

Another voice announced, "Muleish."

"Follyology," someone else suggested.

And so Angelina's moment was lost in a tangle of bitter, and increasingly inappropriate, words from a scrum of inebriated invitees who should have known better. The in-crowd loved a good squabble.

Not the best moment for optimal output, Smith realized. His word would have to wait.

When all had gorged to the max and the servants were clearing the table, Smith sidled over to Jenny, who had wedged herself into a corner.

He took her clammy hand. "Overdrunk?"

She smiled without conviction. "I never want to hear another synonym for aging." A tear tracked down her powdered cheek.

"You need a new guest list."

She shrugged and stared at the snowflake wallpaper.

He released her hand. "Perhaps, then, this is not the right time for a word. . . ."

Jenny burst into weeping.

Smith took a used napkin from a windowledge and handed it to his host.

Then he collected his hat and overcoat and left without saying cheerio.

He took his word home by way of the riverside walk. No point rushing back to an empty apartment. So he strolled and mulled and soon found himself upon a rusted iron bench watching the undulating reflections of the few remaining farside lanterns. In front of him the uneven cracked flagstones were all but defeated, submitting to centuries of frost and feet. He gazed up through his misted breath to the sky, where lights tracked between the stars.

At times like this he often succumbed to thinking. And the subject that, today, had never quite slipped off the edge of his awareness was time-fishing.

He was struck by the wonder of this technology that could listen to the sounds of the past—the words of the street people . . . words never documented. New, old words. Put to other uses, what else could a technology such as that achieve? But before he could begin to imagine the possibilities . . . the changes that could result from a redirected common will—a will concerned with other than oneupmanship through salvaging the scraps of a dying language—he was distracted by nearby voices.

Some way down the riverside path, the Holy Anderson and Angelina were talking. The discussion appeared heated and Smith quieted his breathing in order to hear.

They were having words. Stated words. Exclaimed words. Questioning words. Heartfelt words. . . .

After a time, they both turned to survey the river in silence, then hurried away together.

Smith found himself unsettled. It had been an odd day. Unique perhaps,

with Nicola and Mary and his frustrated dinner party plans and Jenny's uncomfortable emotionality. And now this overheard father/daughter conversation. So many words, so many interesting and educated and unusual words, and yet nothing—nothing at all that mattered—had been said.

That night Smith dreamed of Nicola, the bicycle girl. She rode down from an overcast sky with her long, sun-colored hair flowing around her head. Smith stood upon soft moist grass that made him feel unsteady, unconnected to the world. The girl stopped her bicycle and put one bare foot to the ground. She adjusted her scarlet bikini top.

"I have another new old word for you," she said.

He noted the paleness of her skin, the breathtaking blue globes of her eyes.

"Guaranteed eleventh century," she told him. "My boyfriend overheard it in the babble of a York market."

Smith heard his own mouth say, "I'm not interested."

Nicola stumbled and fought to keep the bicycle upright. "But. . ."

He no longer wanted words. He needed something else. Something he could feel, but not explain.

He watched the sway of the girl's hips as she cycled away.

Something he had not yet bought the word for. . .

He awoke bemused and strangely sad.

The morning was chilled and frosted, the blue sky traced with the intertwined tracks of the offworlders' space freighters. Under this laced canopy, Smith made his way to Jenny's house. A servant admitted him and he found Jenny spread upon a settee, dressed in pink pajamas and browsing through a fine art catalog.

She brightened. "Andrew."

He glanced around and then remembered that Andrew was his own, little-used, name.

She pointed at his head. "No hat?"

He ran a hand over his smooth scalp. "I didn't realize. . ."

"I trust you enjoyed yourself last night," she said.

"Without a doubt."

"Isn't it wonderful to meet so many sparkling, interesting, educated people!"

"So you think it went well?"

She dropped the catalog onto the lacquered teak floor. "Oh yes, I had a wonderful time."

He examined her eyes, but they were one-way glass. He sat next to her on the settee.

"Did you leave something behind at the party?" she said.

"In a way, yes." He took her hand. She returned his grip with a gentle squeeze. "And I've brought something for you," he said.

"Oh good!" She sat upright. "What is it?"

"It's a new *old* word, from 1236 London."

"Wonderful!" She freed her hand and raised her fingertip terminals. "Don't worry about the price. I trust you."

Gently, he lowered her hand. "No charge. I just want you to have it."

And with that, he leaned forward and whispered in her ear. O

CHAINSAW ON HAND

Deborah Coates

It's no coincidence that this is a winter issue, since March may be the perfect time to experience the chill and the warmth of having a "Chainsaw on Hand" during sub-zero South Dakota weather. Deborah Coates lives in Ames, Iowa, where she writes, trains dogs, and works at the university in information technology. Her most recent publications include works in *Strange Horizons*, *Scifi*, *Year's Best Fantasy 6*, *Best New Paranormal Romance*, and *Asimov's*.

This is what winter's like in South Dakota on the plains—you wake up and it's full dark still, maybe five o'clock in the morning and you know without ever throwing the covers off, without ever getting up, that it's at least twenty below zero outside. You can tell by the clean-edged sound of the wind as it hits the corner of the house, as if there's never been a drop of moisture in it, like knives would slice themselves to shreds on a wind like that. You can tell, too, by the feel of the air in the room, the way the frail warmth of the over-stressed furnace is more illusory than real.

It's not possible to be warm on that kind of morning on the plains. Even if you ran the furnace up to eighty. Even if the furnace could get the air up to eighty, it wouldn't be warm—the fragility of surviving on electricity and propane, the understanding that the shiny new wood stove in the kitchen can only really heat a hundred square feet or so in an emergency. All that, the darkness and the cold and the thin edge of knowledge of how close it all is to failure, makes the world close in and makes you hunch your shoulders right on down into your chest as low as you can go.

What you want, on a dark morning like that, with the wind and the cold and the knowledge that you'll never be warm again, is to pull the blankets way up over your head and never come out until spring. But this is South Dakota on the plains in winter. There are cattle waiting to be fed, counting on you as their single source of, well, everything. And because you have to get up anyway, you do.

You sit down in a kitchen chair and adjust automatically as it tips side-

ways where one of the dogs chewed on the leg when he was a puppy. Your work boots are sitting on the mat by the door and you pull them on, yanking the laces tight before tying them. You add a fleece vest, a barn coat, and a knit hat with flaps to your flannel shirt, T-shirt, two layers of long underwear, and jeans two sizes too big. Before you put your gloves on, you look at the coffee pot and think about starting coffee, but the day is already too cold and too cruel, doing something human will only make you suffer more when you step outside the door.

The wind sucks your breath and half the brain cells out of your head when you step outside. The thin layer of snow on the ground is so cold and so dry that the soles of your boots squeak when you walk. You check the young stock in the barn and move feed to the pastures and break ice from the heated water troughs that aren't supposed to freeze. The cattle huddle together with their backs to the wind, all shaggy and icy. The dogs are grateful to be allowed in the truck on the ride back to the house and you are grateful for the extra warmth in the cab.

There are two messages on the answering machine when you get back to the house, even though it's only seven o'clock. You call your mother first.

"I'm going to Pierre," she says when she answers.

"Today?"

"Yes, today. Do you want to come?"

"I don't know. Let me think about it."

"Oh, just come." You can almost see her roll her eyes. "No one's going to point and laugh. They don't even know who you are."

"Okay, fine. I'll come."

You shed boots and jackets and hats and gloves. You stand in the kitchen under the fluorescent lights and take off your jeans and your shirts and your medium-weight long underwear. Then you pull the jeans back on and the flannel shirt. You start coffee brewing in the pot; you take the clothes you shed back upstairs to the bedroom; you pull a town pair of jeans—never been worn for chores—and a white turtleneck and a patchwork knit sweater from the closet for later when you go to town. You make the bed and you put all your things away and you go back down to the kitchen and feed the dogs and pour yourself a cup of coffee. You stare at the phone, then the clock, then the phone again. And then you sigh and pick up the phone and call your ex-husband back.

"Chel?" His voice sounds so normal, deep and certain.

"Bobby."

"There's something I want to show you."

"Now?"

"Well, whenever." There is a sharp flatness in his voice that says yes, he was expecting you to come now.

"I'm going to town," you tell him. "I should be back around three."

"Okay, fine." And he hangs up. There was once a time when Bobby could talk birds out of the trees and mad dogs out of biting and you into marrying him, but that was long-ago Bobby from another life. Present-day Bobby never says more than two words at a time.

By the time you've showered, dressed, and fed the dogs, it's time to

leave. Even with the sun well up, the cold still hits you like a wall when you leave the house. Your father used to call this religious weather because, he said, you couldn't walk out the door without taking the Lord's name in vain. In Boston where you lived for four years out of college, the snow was wet, but in South Dakota, it's always dry. You can walk all day in the snow in South Dakota and only get wet when you go inside.

When you drive by Bobby's house on your way to your mother's, you notice that he has a new sign on his lawn. Right next to "Rabbits for Sale" and "Fresh Eggs" there is now one that simply reads, "Chainsaw on Hand."

You don't have much time to think about it before arriving at your mother's. She is, as always, waiting, and comes outside as you pull into the driveway. When you drive back by Bobby's with her in the car, she draws your attention to the sign. "Chainsaw on Hand? What does that mean?"

"Dunno."

"Well, I mean, I suppose it means he has a chainsaw," your mother continues. "But why does he feel the need to announce it to everyone?"

In South Dakota in the winter, your ex-husband is your responsibility until approximately the end of time. His parents don't talk to him anymore. They shop the next town over. His brother sits in the bar on Saturday afternoons underneath old license plates from New Jersey and Arkansas and tells anyone who'll listen that Bobby was always the crazy one. "He married Chelley Sanderson for hell's sake!" he says in a loud voice that runs scared underneath. "What was he thinking when he did that?"

"I like him, Chelley," your mother has told you over and over and over, as if liking him makes everything all right.

"He talks to people who aren't there," you tell her every time she says it.

"Not people, Chelley," your mother responds as if this is the single fact that saves him.

No, not people; Bobby talks to dreams. Although that's not what he calls them.

The first time he told you they were angels.

"I wish you'd been here, Chel," he said when you returned from three days in Rapid City at a cattle show. "They were golden, absolutely golden."

"Angels, Bobby?" you ask him.

"They stopped everything. They stopped time." He isn't looking at you; his gaze is fixed on something you can never see. "We walked through town, just them and me. It was something."

You try logic. You try reason. You try yelling. Bobby is a sensible man—or at least he was. He knows growing seasons and pole barns and drainage patterns. Bobby is not a man who sees golden angels in time-frozen towns.

And then it happens again.

The next time, you were gone to Iowa State University with Quincy Meadows to take her gelding to the vet school. You are always gone when the angels come—except after the second time Bobby doesn't think they're angels anymore.

"Fairies maybe," he says. "Only big, you know. Or maybe really handsome trolls."

After the fourth time, you ask Bobby to move out. People come up to you in grocery stores and put their hands on your shoulder and stand too close and ask you how Bobby is in that voice that says they might care a little, but mostly they want to be the person who knows the news.

This morning, your mother wants to go to the Pierre Mall and a couple of fabric outlets.

"I'm making Bobby a quilt," she says.

"Why?"

"It's his turn."

"He's not your son-in-law anymore."

"You should be kinder to him," she says while scoping out a parking place at the mall for you. "He's going through a rough patch."

You refrain from pointing out that any rough patch Bobby is going through is his own doing. No one told him to sign over his half of the farm to you, no one told him to quit his job at the mill, no one told him to raise rabbits and sell eggs and scrape an existence out of nothing. Unless the fairies did. Or maybe trolls.

"Maybe it's the devil he talks to, Mom. Did you ever think of that?" You swing into a parking space and sit for a moment with the car running. The day is rounding up on ten-thirty in the morning and it's no warmer than at five. The wind has picked up, too. Welcome to winter in South Dakota.

After the fifth—or maybe sixth—time, the local paper runs an article about the angels, or maybe trolls, with a picture of Bobby out behind the house. Four letters to the editor appear in the next week's edition, double the usual number. Carroll Biedlebaum says it's about TIME—he's been telling everyone for years that there are THINGS in this world both dangerous and hidden. We'd better listen to him and to Bobby or we'll all be sorry. Sallie and Katie Widderman write nearly identical letters pointing out that Jesus and science will determine the truth and volunteering to set up cameras and recorders and a candle-lit prayer offering the next time the angels come. The fourth letter is from your mother. "Bobby doesn't make things up," her letter says. "He's not creative that way. We ought to listen to him."

You and Bobby have known each other since high school. You dated once or twice back then—the junior prom and the homecoming dance Bobby's senior year. He was a year ahead of you, graduated third in his class, and went off to the University of Minnesota to major in engineering, so normal it could make your teeth hurt. Everyone knew he'd be back after graduation.

"Bobby can build damn near anything," his father would proudly tell anyone who'd listen. "We expect he'll be doing big things one of these days."

You got a full four-year scholarship to the University of Chicago, something that stunned everyone, not least of all yourself (though you never admitted that to anyone, just took the acceptance letter to your room and read it to yourself over and over again).

You told your parents the week before you left that you were going to major in psychology because you wanted to know why anyone would voluntarily live in South Dakota in the winter. "It's like one of those prisoner syndromes," you told them. "Or that boiling frog thing." Your mother

smiled as if you'd said something unaccountably brilliant while your father looked at you over the top of his glasses and you knew that they mostly wished you'd stop saying things like that. In Chicago, you discovered academia, research, and thinking that wasn't always interrupted by seeing to the cattle and repairing wire fences and you knew that what you wanted as much as anything was to be a research psychiatrist—medical school and graduate school—MD and PhD—learning and learning and learning until it finally filled you up completely. But then, you got to senior year and you looked \$100,000 and \$200,000 and maybe even bigger loans in the face and you blinked.

And now, here you are, in South Dakota in the winter.

Since you've been back, you've taken up painting. "It's just like psychology," you tell your mother, "only not." Your mother no longer looks at you as if you're unaccountably brilliant when you say things like that; she just rolls her eyes. You figure that the reason she still likes Bobby in spite of everything is because she half suspects you're the one who drove him around the bend.

Three days after the article in the paper, as the summer sky is just fading to dusk, Bobby's brother comes to see you. You pour iced tea and go out on the back porch and the two of you watch the sky turn red. One of the dogs, which has been lying dead asleep by your chair, leaps up and sprints off the porch after a rabbit.

"What if he really sees something?" Bobby's brother finally asks you, the words bursting out of him like a dam break. "What if there really are angels?"

"Or maybe trolls," you say, mostly hoping to distract him.

"Maybe," he says. There is desperation in his voice and a thin edge of something else, like he knows something that he can't tell you because if he says it out loud then he has to actually admit that it's true. You don't want him to say it out loud, anyway. You don't want to admit to anything.

You sit there together in silence a little longer, then Bobby's brother rises in a spring-loaded motion that echoes the dog. "Here, I—" he presses something into your hand and leaves and never looks back. You haven't seen him since.

Later, you sit at the kitchen table and look at what he left you. It's a gold coin or maybe bronze—it changes in the light—bigger than the new dollar and heavy; it might be real gold. It has symbols on one side that almost look Chinese, but aren't, and a landscape on the other that looks a little like the Black Hills and a little like any rugged landscape anywhere. You wonder if Bobby had it made somewhere—it would be a lot of trouble—or maybe he picked it up once at a carnival or someplace. You stick it on the counter above the sink and forget about it, except once in a while when the light hits it in the late afternoon and it glows.

You're home from the mall by 2:30 PM. The wind has sharpened and it's straight out of the north. You let the dogs out and change into long underwear and old jeans and a heavy sweatshirt that used to be Bobby's. The dogs are standing in the yard with as many of their feet off the ground as they can manage, looking as if they're freezing to death, though they run to the house quick enough at your whistle. You're tempted to

take them with you to Bobby's so they can stand like a wall between you. But they'd just fight with the pit-bull cross Bobby picked up from somewhere you don't even want to know about, so you give them food and water, huddle up in a double-thick fleece vest and freshly laundered barn coat, and dive into the bitter cold one more time.

The new sign on Bobby's lawn stands out stark against the bleak winter landscape. "Chainsaw on Hand." What does that mean? Then you hate yourself for even wondering because you know you'll be sorry once you know the answer.

You knock on Bobby's side door and walk in. It's never locked. The pit bull knows you and it comes into the kitchen as you enter, waiting to have its head scratched. The kitchen is warm and even humid as if there are pots of spaghetti cooking somewhere just out of sight. Bobby is in the dining room with all the lights on.

"Hey, Chel," he says when you walk in. He's bent over the big dining room table and doesn't look up from what he's doing. You shed your coat, stuffing your gloves in the pockets, but leave the vest on as if that means you won't be staying long.

After a minute, Bobby straightens up and says, "Take a look." He waves his hand at the dining room table. "It's almost done," he says.

For six and a half months, Bobby has been painstakingly building an exact replica of town and the surrounding countryside. The houses are made of balsa wood and matchsticks. He sculpts the people out of clay. He's recreating the town like it was the first time the angels came. You have avoided asking him why he's doing it, but because it's Bobby, you're pretty sure that he believes if he just lays it all out straight and simple, none of us can help but see what he sees.

Instead of going to the table, you lean against the wall with your arms across your chest. "Is that why you wanted to see me?"

Bobby is tall and lean, lanky like an oversized colt that never grew into its body. He's wearing blue jeans and work boots and nothing more than a faded red t-shirt in spite of the sub-zero air that weaves in around the windows. He has a worn baseball cap, as always, perched on the back of his head which he lifts by the brim, scratching his forehead absently as he looks down on his town. "This?" he says. "No, I—"

The sound of another car pulling into Bobby's driveway cuts across the dry wind outside. "Hold on," Bobby says, like you've been doing anything else for the last year or so. He grabs a jacket off a chair and heads to the back door. You hear him talking to someone in a low voice.

The dining room is cold; you can feel a breeze from the windows and you wish you'd left your jacket on. You wish you'd never come. You could be holed up inside your house, barricaded against the cold—it's not so much where you wish you were, as the only place you have left to be.

You look at the town model Bobby has spread across his dining table. He's painstakingly lettered the signs on old storefronts—Beth's Rings & Things, Shiner Diner, Waterman's Insurance. He's even—you have to squint to look at it—put the "Independent Insurance Agent" logo on the bottom half of Waterman's door. There's a car in the middle of the street, one half-pulled out of a parking space, several women walking out of the

diner, and Bobby himself at the intersection of Main and North. At least you think it's Bobby, like you would recognize him anywhere, even as a stick figure in a make-believe town. He is completely surrounded by six gold coins.

You reach out and pick up one of the coins. It's heavy, like the one Bobby's brother gave you, and warm against your palm. You close your fingers over it and the warmth of the coin seems to spread all the way up your arm.

You close your eyes.

The back door closes with a loose rattle and, startled, you drop the coin back on the table. It lands with a ringing sound, like metal against crystal, and rolls across the table until it settles with a tiny shudder almost exactly where it was when you picked it up.

"Eggs," Bobby says as he reenters the room and sheds his coat, without looking, laying it in the exact spot it was before.

You put your hands in your pockets and look away from the table and the gold coins and miniature Bobby.

"Don't the chickens get cold, Bobby?" you ask despite yourself. He can't make a living from a sign posted in his yard.

"I've got a good place fixed up for them," Bobby says. "You'd be surprised."

You decide that if you're going to be surprised today it's not going to be over chickens. "That new sign, Bobby? 'Chainsaw on Hand?' What's that supposed to mean?"

He cocks his head to one side and looks at you with the ghost of a slow, sweet smile. "What does it mean to you?"

"Nothing," you tell him, irritated with yourself all over again for asking. "It means nothing to me, Bobby. It's just stupid."

Bobby shakes his head sadly. "Then I guess it means nothing," he says.

Exasperation wars with weariness because the truth is you're just plain tired of Bobby and fairies—or maybe trolls—and of being in South Dakota in the bleak depths of endless winter. "No one puts a sign in their yard that says 'Chainsaw on Hand.'"

"I do," Bobby says. "I like to be prepared."

"Bobby, did you want to see me for a reason?"

Bobby looks at you as if he's waiting for something you can't give him. He ducks his head and rubs the back of his neck. "I have something to show you," he says.

"What?" You have a thousand better things to do—stoke the wood stove, feed the dogs, stuff rags around the rattling kitchen window.

"It's outside."

Your shoulders hunch as if you're outside already. "It's goddamned cold outside, Bobby."

"It'll be okay." Like he controls the weather.

You sigh and bite your lip on all the things you want to say, but never do. It's not Bobby you're mad at anyway. You could be living in Boston or Chicago or St. Paul. No one is making you live out in the open. No one is making you do anything.

It takes five minutes to put on your coat and hat and gloves and zip

and button everything up to your nose. You can feel the burn of the wind across your cheekbones and you haven't even stepped out the door. The sun is low when you walk outside, flat against the horizon. There are no shadows, just fading half-light slanting blue across the snow.

Your boots and Bobby's squeak on the snow as you walk past the two barns and the tool shed toward the lean-to that houses Bobby's old tractor. Just past that is open pasture, an old cemetery in a grove of dying trees, and the creek that divides Bobby's land from his neighbors. The last time you came out this way it was late spring and muddy. Bobby insisted on showing you what he called "definitive proof of fairy/troll presence."

Bobby's proof turned out to be three boxes made from some material that looked and felt exotic, but tore exactly like cardboard. All three of them were empty inside except for three cards in the bottom of the largest one that had been printed on both sides with unrecognizable and indecipherable symbols.

"How did they get here?" Bobby asked you.

"I don't know, Bobby, there's a hundred ways they could have gotten here."

"Name one."

"You could have put them here."

"But I didn't."

And then he offered you one of the cards, which you, of course, refused.

You know it's going to be like that again, some lame thing Bobby's made up to convince you of something that only Bobby believes is true. You can feel the cold right through your coat and your fleece vest and your two pairs of long underwear. You can feel it in your bones.

In South Dakota in winter the temperature can linger below zero for weeks. Clear skies and weak sun and bone dry wind that grinds your face like sandpaper go on day after day until you don't remember that it's ever been warm, that grass has ever been green. If it were suddenly summer in South Dakota after a week of minus two, you would hate it—it would be too hot and too humid and frightening, like the world was ending in fire instead of ice. In South Dakota in winter, you don't think about seventy degrees or eighty degrees. As far as you're concerned the tropics don't exist; palm trees, blue waters—they're just a television fantasy. Twenty degrees would be enough. If the temperature got up to twenty degrees, you'd unbutton your jacket and shed an entire layer of long underwear. At twenty degrees you'd walk outside without your head covered, with your face turned toward the sun, like you were living in Bermuda. Twenty degrees in South Dakota in winter would give you enough hope to go on.

Right now you can't imagine that it will ever be twenty degrees again.

You stumble on a patch of ice and jerk away from Bobby's offered hand. You realize that you're crying and you don't know when it started. The tears don't freeze on your cheeks, not in cold like this—moisture can't survive. You duck your head so Bobby won't see, but he knows anyway. He puts his hand under your arm and guides you over by the lean-to.

You're out of the wind up against the lean-to wall and just that, just stepping out of the wind, makes it feel half as cold as it was.

"Don't," Bobby says, leaning toward you as if he can block the cold. "I'm sorry."

"I wasn't crying," you say. You rub your hand across your cheek, rubbing away tears that aren't there anyway. "It's not like I care."

Bobby looks away, toward the cemetery and the creek and things you can't see.

"I thought—" he says.

He turns and looks straight at you—you'd forgotten that his eyes are a blue that looks like midnight mixed with summer.

"Bobby—" you begin, because somehow you know that whatever he's going to say, you want to stop him.

He ducks his head as if he wants to say and not-say something at the same time and when he does speak the words come out all in a rush, his voice pitched a half-octave higher than normal. "Maybe I won't see them anymore," he says.

"The fairies?" you ask, your voice half-choked; whatever you expected this isn't it.

"Or whatever."

You forget the cold completely. You look at him as if the world, and not just you, has stopped breathing. You want to ask him—would it be like it was before, would he come back to the farm, would he charm the birds off trees, would he smile—like summer when it's ninety-five and you can't remember that it's ever been cold, like we'd never been here at all, on this shabby run-down farm with the chickens and the signs and the chainsaw on hand.

Bobby has stepped away from you; he's slouched against the metal wall of the lean-to, his arms across his chest. He isn't looking at you. There is something tight and tense about him, even slouched like that, not the way he's been, as if he doesn't give a damn, almost as if he cares what you will say.

You've thought all along that this was easy for Bobby. He's left you and the farm and his family and his life. He has fairies or angels or trolls who freeze time for him, who make it all right to scrape a living from chickens and rabbits. It can't be cold when the fairies come—that's what you've always figured—there is no need for chainsaws. Bobby gets off easy; everyone else pays the price.

"Why?" you finally ask.

Bobby shrugs. "I'm just saying," he tells you, though he doesn't look your way when he says it.

A blast of pure winter fire flashes through your veins. You were always right and Bobby was always wrong.

After the University of Chicago, you took a job in Boston at a consulting firm running statistics on focus groups and research surveys. In Boston, it gets wet instead of cold. In Boston, no one ever puts a sign in their front yard that says "Chainsaw on Hand." In Boston, life never notices you, until one day Bobby shows up out of nowhere and asks you to go whale watching with him.

"Why?" you ask.

"How long have you been here?" he says.

"Four years," you tell him.

"Have you ever seen whales?"

"Well, no."

You should have asked him right then about fairies and angels and trolls. You should have realized what you were getting into. Instead you go whale watching and hiking in New Hampshire and out to dinner at the most expensive restaurant in Boston, which neither of you can afford.

Right now in the shelter of a thin metal wall, with the temperature dropping and every breath burning dry in your throat, you suddenly remember something you forgot, or maybe never even knew—the reason you came back to South Dakota was not because you had nowhere else to go.

"Bobby."

You wipe a hand across your cheek. "Bobby," you say again just so he knows you're really talking to him. And even then, you don't know the words you're going to say until they're already out of your mouth.

"That's not what I want at all."

Five things have surprised you in your life: the first time you saw a calf born in the middle of a green pasture in spring, winning a full scholarship to the University of Chicago just because you were smart enough, when Bobby came to Boston to take you whale watching, finally figuring out how to mix paint the exact color blue of the South Dakota sky on the longest day of summer.

And now this.

"What do you want, Chelley?" Bobby asks. His voice is tired, hopeful, desperate and resigned all in one.

You know, finally, that you have the power to pierce his soul. You know that he has the power to do the same to you.

"I want to see fairies," you tell him, "Or maybe trolls."

Bobby laughs, a sound you haven't heard in longer than you can say. He reaches out his hand and you reach out and take it. You realize, though you should have always known, that warmth doesn't always come from winds out of the south or woodstoves stoked with birch logs or cattle standing huddled in the barn.

You don't know what will happen next. You don't know how to make things work or what it will be like the next time Bobby says the fairies have frozen time. You don't know if Bobby will charm birds again or come back to the farm or smile just because you need him to.

What you know is that even in South Dakota in winter, even with a chainsaw, you can never really be prepared for everything. ○

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Brian Stableford's recent works include the novel *The New Faust at the Tragicomique* and the anthology *News from the Moon and Other French Scientific Romances*, both from Black Coat Press. Routledge published his mammoth reference book *Science Fact and Science Fiction: An Encyclopedia* in 2006. One does not have to be familiar with the remarkable events that occurred in Brian's tale about "The Plurality of Worlds" (August 2006), to follow the further exploits of Francis Drake and his adventures on . . .

DOCTOR MUFFET'S ISLAND

Brian Stableford

1

The island's only hill was so shallow that it would have posed no challenge at all had it been a Devon moor, nor was its vegetation unduly thorny, but the thin-boled trees were parasitized by so many sticky vines that it was difficult for Francis Drake and Martin Lyle to climb it, even with the aid of a machete.

The island seemed to have little in the way of animal life except for birds, of which there were many brightly colored kinds, which seemed quite unintimidated by their visitors. Whenever Drake was not fully occupied in clearing a path he attempted to watch the birds more attentively, but the only result of his cursory study was a conviction that a few of the larger parrots were studying him with equal intensity. It was easy to imagine that the endless avian chattering was conversation.

When Drake and his young cousin finally got to the top of the rise it was necessary for the boy to climb a coconut palm with the captain's best telescope clutched beneath his arm. Drake watched him anxiously, afraid for the instrument. It was one of John Dee's finest, designed with the aid of the theory of optics Dee and Tom Digges had worked out in happier

days and constructed by a lens-grinder from Strasbourg, who had fled to Protestant England to escape the gathering storm of the continental wars of religion. In theory, it was a capital offense for anyone outside the Queen's Navy to possess a telescope, but Drake had long been an exception to that rule. The ettership fiasco had reduced his reputation as Queen Jane's favorite privateer, but he ought to be able to recover his prestige if his present expedition went well.

As soon as Martin had attained an adequate height, Drake demanded to know whether the large island of which he desperately wanted news was visible. Its real existence was a point he desperately needed to prove, for the benefit of his belief in his own sanity.

Martin uncapped the telescope's objective lens, and put it to his eye. "I can see two isles to the west, captain," he reported. "The nearer is tiny, no bigger than this one, but the other—*God's blood!*"

There had been a time when Drake's automatic reaction would have been to warn the boy against taking the Lord's name in vain, but they were in the middle of the mis-named Pacific Ocean now. Although Drake had prayed as fervently as he ever had in his life during the storms that had driven them back to Peru when they had first emerged from the Magellan Straits, cursing did not seem so dire a sin when the nearest church was a thousand miles away and papist.

"What is it, boy?" Drake asked, anxiously.

"It's a ship, captain," Martin reported. "She's heading straight toward us with full sail. She's bigger than the *Pelican*."

Drake did not trouble to remind his kinsman that the *Pelican* had now been the *Golden Hind* for more than fifty days. "Is she flying Spanish colors?" he asked, filled with sudden dread.

"The cross of Saint George!" Martin reported, excitedly. "She's English!"

Drake could not share his cousin's enthusiasm. The remainder of his crewmen would doubtless be as glad as Martin to discover Englishmen on the far side of the world, but to him it signified that he had been forestalled. He could not imagine by whom, but the fact was obvious—unless the red cross were a treacherous ploy, intended to deceive. That seemed unlikely, though. The Spanish ships plying the nascent navigation-paths west of the Americas were cargo vessels, not warships; they had no fear yet of pirates or privateers and no incentive to display false colors.

Although the *Hind* was anchored to the south of the islet, with no headland to shield her from view, there was no way that the captain of this mysterious vessel could tell what she was unless the man in his crow's-nest was equipped with a telescope at least as good as Drake's own. Even if the Spanish navy had such instruments, they would not have been given to explorers of this ocean. As good Romanists, the Spaniards were supposed to believe that the Pacific had no land in it at all, with the possible exception of Dante's mount of Purgatory. The existence of the Americas had already proved Cosmas' geography ludicrously false, but the Roman Church always let go of its mistakes by slow degrees.

"Has she gun-ports in her sides?" Drake demanded.

"Can't tell," Martin replied. "She's front-on, and all I can see for sure is her sails. But she's English, captain—English for sure."

"Come down now!" Drake commanded. The boy made haste to obey. Drake remembered as soon as he had spoken that he had not asked for details of the more distant island that Martin had seen—but there would be time enough for that when more urgent matters had been settled.

Drake did not wait for Martin's feet to touch the ground. He set off down the hill, cursing himself for not having cleared a better trail as they came up it. Running was direly difficult, and it seemed to Drake that the vines had become positively malevolent, lying in ambush to catch his feet and trip him. To avoid any impression of panic, though, he waited until he did not have to yell at the top of his voice to order William Ashley, his second mate, to regather the landing-party and get the pinnacle afloat.

The wind was blowing from the west, almost directly contrary to the course Drake had been endeavoring to follow. That was why he had consented to put in at such a unpromising island, which would surely have been inhabited had it nursed the free-standing pools and streams of fresh water he needed to replenish his casks. Given that the other ship was under full sail, and had been close enough for its colors to be identifiable at first sight, it would likely reach the island within the hour. It would be politic for the *Golden Hind* to be in deep water when she arrived, with sail enough aloft to out-maneuver her. Even if her colors were true, that could not guarantee that her crew were loyal subjects of Queen Jane. It was darkly rumored in Plymouth that the Elizabethans had enough ships and captains of their own to form a shadow navy of sorts, and that they had secret bases in the far-flung corners of the globe, from which they ceaselessly plotted rebellion. Drake thought such tales highly unlikely, but the appearance of the ship was so improbable in itself that he dared not discount any possibility.

Drake had no fear of being outgunned, let alone of being outsailed, by Spaniards, Elizabethans, or the Devil himself. The tightness in his chest and the nauseous feeling in his gut arose entirely from frustration, not from some God-given presentiment of disaster. As he made what haste he could to reach the strand with his dignity intact, all he could think about was the folly that had caused him to be seduced by Tom Digges and John Dee into volunteering for the crew of the ethership instead of making his present expedition three years before, in 1577. That three-year delay, it seemed, had cost him his priority. Even knowing the position of the island he had selected as his target—the sole advantage he had obtained from the ethership's disastrous voyage—had proved inadequate. Someone had got here ahead of him.

There was confusion on the beach as men hurried back toward the pinnacle from every direction, bearing whatever natural booty they had been able to gather—coconuts, for the most part, with a few turtles and baskets of eggs laid by ground-nesting birds. There was need of a sharp mind and a commanding voice, but Drake was careful to give his orders in a level voice, rather than barking or howling them, forming the words with precision. No one asked him what the matter was; the crew did as they were told, as quickly and efficiently as they could. Once Martin had arrived in his wake, though, still carrying the precious telescope, the sailors were quick to seek better enlightenment from the boy.

The mate was the one man who guessed why Drake was so anxious in

the face of seemingly good news. As soon as the pinnacle was afloat and headed back to the *Golden Hind* Ashley made his way to Drake's side and murmured in his ear: "How did they come here, captain? Who else knows what you know about the isle at seventeen?" He meant seventeen degrees south—the latitude that Walter Raleigh had estimated while he had hastily sketched a series of maps during the ethership's initial ascent.

"Why, no one," the captain replied, grimly. "Who would believe it, if anyone did, since I am mad, and everything that happened aboard the ethership was mere Devil-led delusion?"

Drake spoke sarcastically, as he had learned to do, but it was the truth. So far as he knew, no one else did know of the island's existence, save for the *Golden Hind*'s officers—and none of them had been told until they had left the Magellan Straits. He had told no one in England—not even Tom Digges—while he tried in vain to convince the ethership's master that their experiences within the moon and among the stars had most certainly not been a dream.

Only three of the *Queen Jane*'s five-man crew had survived the break-up of the ship, although the bodies of the other two had never been found, presumably having fallen into the Kentish marshes or the Thames estuary. Of those three, John Field had embellished his own experiences with such a surfeit of imagined devilry that no one in the world—with the possible exception of his master, Archbishop John Foxe—could have believed his testimony. Tom Digges, to Drake's utter astonishment, had claimed that it had all been a hallucination caused by the intoxicating effects of the ether. The combination of those two testimonies, set against his own, had made Drake seem a monumental fool when he insisted that it had all been real, and that the Devil had not come into it at all. Drake had been forced to abandon that insistence, and by virtue of that abandonment, he had kept Walter Raleigh's sketch-map a very close secret indeed. He had taken care not to show it to Master Dee, let alone to Northumberland or any other member of the Privy Council, reserving it for his own future use.

In truth, he could not know how trustworthy the map was. Had he not had his own duties to attend to while the ethership was in flight—he was the only true crewman aboard, save for Digges—he would certainly have made his own maps as best he could, or at least graven the sight of the world's far side more securely into his memory, but he had had work to do. Raleigh had been trained in navigation and mathematics by Dee, just as Drake had, so his eye ought to have been trustworthy, but Raleigh had stuffed most of his drawings and scribblings into his own doublet before leaping to his death. Drake had only picked up a single sheet, dropped in the confusion, and he had no reliable way of knowing how good its scrawled estimates of latitude and longitude were, or whether the island really was the largest landmass in the vast Pacific east of the Austral continent and its companion isles.

If even he could not be sure of anything, what reliable information could any other shipmaster have had? If he had been beaten to his target by pure chance, it was a cruel blow. Had he set out in 1577 to explore the Pacific, as he had originally planned, he might have found the isle by chance himself.

Drake had to pause in his thoughts to bark further orders to the men aboard the *Golden Hind* as the pinnace came alongside. By the time the landing-party was back on board, with the pinnace lifted up and its meager cargo unloaded, the ship was already putting on sail and the anchor was ready to be raised. Drake snatched the telescope from his kinsman and began to climb the rigging himself to use it to best effect.

The vessels were coming together rapidly now, although the *Hind* was merely waiting, and Drake was able to take the other vessel's measure. She was bigger than the *Hind*, but not as well-crafted. She was moving swiftly, but that was because she was riding high in the water, evidently carrying very little cargo. The *Hind* was fully-laden, as she had had to be for an expedition into unknown waters, with landfalls likely to be very few and far between.

Martin had confirmed that there was another island beyond the tiny one he had seen. If the other captain was sailing without a full complement of necessary supplies, Drake reasoned, he must have come from that isle, and must have a secure base there—but there was no need for further speculation. Whether its lookout had a telescope or not, the master of the other ship had to know by now that the *Golden Hind* was heavily armed; even so, the vessel kept sailing dead ahead, intent on a rendezvous.

Damn you! Drake thought, bitterly. *Damn you to Hell, whoever you are!* He knew, though, that it was a thought he would have to keep to himself.

2

“**W**hat vessel are you?” cried a voice from the prow of the other vessel. None of the men gathered there was wearing a naval uniform.

“The *Golden Hind*, out of Plymouth,” replied Edward Hammond, Drake's first mate. “Sir Francis Drake her master. What ship are you?”

If the other vessel had been away from home for several years, Drake thought, his name might still strike the right resonance, identifying the most glorious of all Queen Jane's privateers: the man who had mustered the Cimaroon army to attack the Spanish in Panama and Mexico, rather than the madman whose mind had been addled by contact with the interplanetary ether.

“The *Fortune*, out of Southampton,” was the ritual reply. “Sir Humphrey Gilbert her master.”

Gilbert! Drake repeated, silently. He had never met the man, but knew the name. Gilbert was not so much a mariner as a tradesman, but it was said that he had gone exploring—like many a pioneer before him—for the north-west passage. If so, he was half a world away from where he should be—and where he was very likely to have perished, if precedent signified anything. Until John Dee had built his ethership, the only thing in the world more dangerous in than seeking the north-west passage to the Indies had been seeking the north-east passage thereto. The tropics were terrible regions for disease, drought, and piracy, but Drake had always preferred hazards of those sorts to the implacable enmity of limitless ice.

One thing of which Drake could be gladly certain, though, was that Sir

Humphrey Gilbert was no enemy, for all that he must now be reckoned a successful rival in the navigation of the Pacific. When the invitation came for him to come aboard the *Fortune*, he agreed immediately. The pinnace was lowered again, after the inevitable delay caused by the necessity of bringing the two ships on to the same course, carrying just sail enough to match their progress. Drake took no one with him but half a dozen oarsmen. He climbed up to the *Fortune's* deck alone.

Gilbert was waiting for him, in company with two mates. One of the mates and fully half the crew bore far more resemblance to Patagonians or Peruvians than Europeans, although they were distinct in kind. Gilbert was stout and grey-haired, looking far more the tradesman than the mariner. He appeared to be at least fifty years old—a very ripe age for the latter vocation. He also appeared to be anxious and apprehensive, although he seemed sincerely joyful to see his visitor.

"I'm delighted to meet you, Captain Drake," the old man said. "Your arrival is so timely that it's surely a gift from God."

"Timely?" Drake repeated. "How so?"

Gilbert's answer was somewhat evasive. "It's more than two years since we've had news from home," the tradesman said. "We never expected to see another English ship in these parts—nor a Spaniard either, since Magellan failed to complete his own crossing."

"Your astonishment must be less than my own," Drake replied, carefully, "for I had no inkling that any Englishman had come here before me. If you were commissioned by the Queen or her Privy Council, I wish that they had warned me that others might have gone through the Straits of Magellan before me."

"There was no one who could warn you, Captain," Gilbert said. "Even had they known that you might come here instead of hunting Spanish gold in Peru." Gilbert had obviously guessed that Drake had not been entirely honest in revealing his true plans to the authorizers of his own voyage.

"Have you founded a colony on the large island yonder?" Drake asked.

"I wouldn't call it a colony," Gilbert said, "but it's long been our base."

"And why are you so glad to see the *Golden Hind*?" Drake asked, bluntly. "Is your base under threat?"

"We've feared so in recent weeks," Gilbert confessed. "The island provides abundant resources, in terms of water, food, and wood, but we've run short of gunpowder—and the guns we have would be of little use were hostile tribesmen to attack us in force. The arrival of so many Englishmen, as fully armed as your ship seems to be, will surely reduce that probability dramatically. You'll accept our hospitality, I hope? The contrary wind will make it a slow passage, for we'll have to tack very broadly, but I think you'll find the destination congenial if you've run low on water and fresh food—as you must have done, there being no sizeable island between here and the Land of Fire."

"I was blown back to the South American coast the first time I set out to make the ocean crossing," Drake admitted. "We made landfalls in Chile, but the natives took us for Spaniards and reacted accordingly. We had to go as far as Peru before we found a Spanish port we could take, in order to make repairs and take on adequate supplies of water and food."

"It's a bad coast," Gilbert agreed. "No Cimaroons there with whom to make alliance. You've done exceedingly well, Captain Drake, to get this far—and you're fortunate to find us. Tahiti is large enough, and has more than a hundred satellite islands, but this ocean is very large indeed, and the cluster would be easy enough to miss."

"Tahiti?" Drake queried.

"It's the native name for the isle. We were able to establish friendly relations when we first arrived, but matters have deteriorated somewhat since then. I hope that won't deter you from accepting our invitation to visit."

"Of course not," Drake said. "The invitation is most welcome, and if we can be of service . . . might I recognize the names of anyone else included in your *we*?"

"Very likely. Some of our men might conceivably have sailed with you in the Caribbean, since we recruited seasoned ocean sailors, but you'll doubtless identify them in your own time. Among the patrons of the voyage, you'll certainly have heard of Thomas Muffet."

"Muffet?" Drake echoed, amazed to hear the name. "Muffet the physician, who turned the Royal College upside-down? The silkworm man?"

"Indeed. A man not unlike yourself, in that he was somewhat underappreciated in his own land, although he's not a man of action: a physician, as you say, whose new ideas were not at all welcome when he returned home after his continental studies."

"A Paracelsian," Drake observed.

"In a broad sense, yes," Gilbert agreed, "although the aspect of Paracelsus' creed that appealed to him most was its irreverence for received authority and its determination to make medical theory anew. As a friend of Tom Digges and John Dee, you must surely sympathize with the revolutionary thrust of the *new* New Learning."

Drake pursed his lips slightly at the mention of Digges' name, but all he said aloud was: "Master Dee taught me navigation and figures, as he did for many an English captain, but I couldn't presume to call him a friend—although you must surely have that privilege."

"We knew one another quite well at one time," Gilbert admitted, blandly, "but we drifted apart."

Drake knew that there were rival camps within English learning, whose nuances he did not understand. Even Dee's determination to build a national library had embroiled him in a surprisingly fervent rivalry with men like Stephen Batman; his more adventurous explorations in mathematics, alchemy, and astrology were regarded as intellectual follies even by some who did not think them frankly heretical. The revisionist alchemy that had underpinned Dee's construction of the ethership would have been labeled Paracelsian by some, but Drake knew Tom Digges well enough to understand that its theory had far outstripped that of Paracelsus. Was it possible, he wondered, that Thomas Muffet had made similar advances in the medical field? But if so, why on earth would he have taken ship for the remotest reaches of the southern ocean? Unorthodox medical practice had never been a safe business in England, even before Foxe's puritans gained such a stronghold within the established Church and the Royal College had obtained its monopolistic warrant, but men of

that sort forced into exile could easily find safe havens on the continent.

When Drake made no reply to his observation, Gilbert said: "Will you stay on the *Fortune* while we make our way to my pleasant harbor, Captain Drake? I'll be happy to supply you with a good meal."

"I'd rather not dine well while my men are on short rations," Drake told him, although he knew few ships' masters who would have been so squeamish. "I'll go back to the *Golden Hind* and follow you to your harbor. Once we're all able to come ashore and enjoy a feast, I'll be more than happy to join you, and to meet Doctor Muffet."

"Splendid!" said Gilbert, enthusiastically. "It will give us all great pleasure to entertain guests, and to receive news of home. It will be a fine night, from every point of view!"

Except, thought Drake, from the viewpoint of the man who hoped to be this isle's discoverer, and who hoped to redeem his battered reputation by claiming it for England and Queen Jane. It was not much consolation to him that the island Sir Humphrey Gilbert called Tahiti was exactly where he had expected to find an island—which is to say, exactly where poor Raleigh had marked it on the map he had sketched while the *Queen Jane* was orbiting the earth. In itself, that could not prove that everything else Drake had experienced in the course of the ethership's journey had been real. It still remained a possibility—as he had to admit even to himself—that his memories of being seized by the Selenite horde and dispatched by cosmic cannon to the center of the universe, where insects and sea-slugs ruled supreme over a hitherto-unimaginable Creation, were the produce of some remarkable delusion.

"Yes, Sir Humphrey," he said to Gilbert. "I'm sure that my crewmen will rejoice in the opportunity."

3

When Drake saw that Humphrey Gilbert had three smaller ships anchored in the natural harbor where he had constructed his "base," he realized that the expedition that had discovered Tahiti must have been large and well-planned. When he was able to judge the extent of the constructions that the Englishmen had erected around the bay he realized, too, that their settlement here was no temporary affair, intended merely as a barracks where men might be housed until they had made repairs and gathered provisions for a long journey home. This really was a colony—and one that had been built from the outset with a view to defense, for the Englishmen's enclave was surrounded by a stout stockade, with sentry posts and loopholes for muskets.

Although there were several buildings within the central stockade that seemed big enough to serve as dormitories for a ship's crew, there was also a surprisingly large number of smaller huts. From the *Golden Hind's* anchorage, Drake could see with the aid of his telescope that the great majority of the Englishmen were lodged in the huts, many of them having apparently coupled themselves with women of the same kind as the men he had seen on the *Fortune*. It was evident that not all of the island's

tribesmen were hostile, but there was no way for Drake to estimate what the total population might be, or what proportion of that total could be counted friendly.

Drake was careful to divide his men into two parties, and to explain his reasons for doing so. "There's some kind of trouble brewing outside that stockade, lads," he told them, having assembled them on deck. "Gilbert has promised us a feast tonight, but he's fearful, and was exceedingly glad to see an English ship so well-armed as the *Hind*. The men who remain on board tonight will eat as well as those who go ashore, and there'll be plenty of opportunity to trade places, but the ship must be guarded very carefully, and its supplies of black powder kept safe. We'll take no guns with us tonight, but I want every man who goes ashore to keep his eyes and ears open and his wits about him. Find out everything you can about the situation here. If we have to defend ourselves, or our fellows ashore, I need to know how many enemies we're likely to face, and what sort."

"Will you try to make friends with the natives, Captain?" Hammond asked, not so much for his own benefit as to give Drake the opportunity to inform his crew of a matter of policy.

"As ever, Ned," Drake said. "It's always best to make allies instead of enemies, if we can—and if we're forced to face enemies in the end, it's best to do so with allies by our side."

When the shore party landed and moved through the settlement, Drake was struck by the extent and complexity of the marketplace that had been established within the stockade. He was not surprised to see that the Englishmen had established a forge and a glass manufactory as well as a carpentry shop, but he was astonished to see a brewery, a bath-house, and a candle-factory, and by the industry that was in process in all these places. Relations between the Englishmen and the natives appeared entirely harmonious on this side of the defensive wall, but he knew how unlikely it was that the wall was maintained merely to keep up appearances.

Gilbert did not hurry his guests as he led them through the town. He took pleasure in allowing Drake to savor his achievements. Gilbert's own house was undoubtedly the most finely crafted in the settlement, but it was not the largest. When the outbuildings crowded around its larger neighbor were taken into account, Gilbert's dwelling was somewhat overshadowed.

"That's Doctor Muffet's house," Gilbert said, in response to Drake's inquisitive stare. "The accessory buildings are his specimen-houses and his laboratory."

All physicians, Drake knew, could be reckoned alchemists of a sort—Paracelsians more than most—but there were few who kept laboratories. On the other hand, a herbalist must surely be able to find all kinds of exotic specimens in a place as foreign as this, whose properties might warrant careful examination. Drake had had an opportunity while the *Hind* was laid up in Peru to appreciate the extent to which the local vegetation differed from what he had seen on his Caribbean adventures, let alone the forests and meadows of England. He recalled, as that thought crossed his mind, that Muffet was one of the few Europeans to have made a study of imported silkworm cocoons, and wondered if there might be more factories here than he had so far seen.

"The doctor and his daughter will join us for dinner, of course, and my chaplain, too," Gilbert said. "How many of your officers will be joining us?"

"Mr. Hammond and Mr. Ashley, if that suits you, Sir Humphrey," Drake said, "and my kinsman Martin Lyle, if that is also agreeable."

"Of course," Gilbert said, as he ushered Drake over the threshold of his house. It had only a single story, but its shallow-pitched roof had a number of storage attics. The ground floor had a dining-room that was almost a banqueting-hall, a reception-room, three bedrooms, and a kitchen, into which a cast-iron stove had been transferred from one of the smaller vessels in Gilbert's fleet,

"I would be honored if you would accept my hospitality, Captain Drake," Gilbert said. "I'll find quarters for your mates with their peers among my own men, and for your crewmen with theirs. I think you'll all find the accommodations comfortable, after such a long time at sea. How long have you been voyaging, exactly?"

"It's thirteen months since we left England," Drake told him. "Thirty-seven days since we last spent a night ashore. Did you say just now that Doctor Muffet has his daughter with him?"

"I did," Gilbert confirmed, as he invited Drake to sit down on a wicker armchair and offered him a cup of fresh water. "A remarkable thing, I know, but he didn't want to leave her in England while he was away for several years. Her mother's dead. She was only four years old when we set out, but she's seven now. She wasn't the only child on the expedition, although the others had mothers to care for them."

Drake suppressed the exclamation that sprung immediately to his lips, but could not help making a more considered observation. "Then this *was* a colonial enterprise!" he said. "But how did you end up *here* instead of the Virginias?" He accepted the proffered cup of water, and found it extremely sweet by comparison with the dregs of the *Golden Hind's* barrels.

"No," Gilbert said, "it wasn't a colonial expedition in the sense that you mean. The Doctor's associates and servants brought their families with them, though."

A native servant brought in a huge basket of fruit, from which Gilbert invited Drake to take his pick. Drake was hesitating between the familiar and the unfamiliar when a movement in the doorway caught his eye. It was a blonde girl-child in a cornflower-blue dress. Drake had not seen her like for a very long time.

"Come in, Patience," said Gilbert. "Captain Drake was just asking about you. Is your father coming?"

"Ten minutes, he said," the girl replied, staring at Drake with a frankness that would have been educated out of a girl her age in England.

"Captain Drake is one of the most famous sailors in England," Gilbert told the girl. "There's no Englishman the Spaniards fear more, or the Cimaroons like better."

"What's a Cimaroon?" the girl asked.

Gilbert merely laughed, so Drake took it upon himself to explain. "A descendant of runaway slaves," he said. "The Spaniards and the Portuguese imported large numbers of Africans to work in their American colonies, but there's a whole continent into which the rebels among them may run

away, and many do. Those that have settled among the Indians become embroiled in local tribal conflicts but they remain a hybrid race, distinctive enough for me to be able to unite them. I rallied them by means of the argument that England, as the great rival of their worst enemy, was potentially their best friend. Sir Humphrey flatters me by calling me famous, though. Even in England, there are some who reckon me a dangerous pirate, ever likely to precipitate open warfare between England and Spain."

"Is that why the queen sent you away in Master Dee's ettership, and afterward called you mad?" the little girl asked, taking her frankness to a remarkable and rather distressing limit.

"Perhaps it is," Drake replied, more honestly than he could have wished. He looked at Gilbert, and added: "It was polite of you not to mention that circumstance before. I had begun to wonder whether you knew it."

"You're among friends here," Gilbert was quick to say. "We know that you were not mad."

Drake's astonishment increased by a further increment. "Do you, indeed?" he said. "You know better than I do, then." What he was thinking, though, was that if Sir Humphrey Gilbert and Thomas Muffet knew that he was not mad, it could not have been chance that had brought them here. He had told Hammond that no one else could possibly know about the island whose position Walter Raleigh had marked, but that was not strictly true. Tom Digges might know, even though he claimed—or at least pretended—that everything he had experienced outside the earth had been a dream. John Field might know too—but the more important possibility was that John Dee might have had the information from Tom Digges. Dee was a hero to every master mariner in England, even those from whose acquaintance he had drifted apart, and if he had said to anyone that there was a sizeable island at approximately seventeen degrees south and somewhere near one hundred and fifty degrees west, they would have trusted him, even if they knew that he had read it in the stars.

"We're very glad to see you here, Captain Drake," Gilbert assured him, "whatever your commission may have been when you left home. If, perchance, you're so far from home because you no longer feel entirely welcome there, you'd be very welcome to make a home here, temporarily or permanently."

"Permanently!" Drake repeated, in surprise. "Do you intend to stay here permanently, then, though you refuse to call your settlement a colony and fear a native uprising?"

"Not I," Gilbert replied, "but . . ."

"But there are some among us who might, if we're granted leave," said a new voice. Another person had appeared in the doorway through which the blonde-haired girl had come. "I'm Thomas Muffet, physician," the newcomer continued. "I have a certain reputation for madness myself, among the Galenists of the Royal College, but I can assure you that I'm as sane as you are, Captain Drake." He extended his hand to Drake, who shook it willingly.

"I know your name," Drake said, "and I'm acquainted with wiser people than I who'd gladly swear to your sanity, including Philip Sidney and his sister."

"Good friends," Muffet said. "Have you news of them?"

Drake shook his head, and Gilbert put in: "Captain Drake has been away from England thirteen months."

Muffet frowned. "Were you delayed?" he asked.

Gilbert was quick to speak again, saying: "The captain wasn't commissioned to follow us, Doctor. I may be reading the situation wrongly, for I was hesitant to speak openly too soon, but I'd guess that he left home with the ostensible purpose of harassing the Spaniards and the Portuguese up and down the coasts of South America, and that his expedition to Tahiti was something of a private venture. I think he's more than a little disappointed, as well as surprised, to find us here." Gilbert had the grace to seem slightly discomfited as he spelled this out.

"You're right," Drake conceded, readily enough. "I had reason to believe that this island, and the others in its group, were here, but I was very wary of confessing those reasons to others in England."

"You saw them from the ethership, of course," said Muffet. "When your other testimony was so cruelly discounted, you dared not declare your intention of confirming what you had seen as a formal objective of your voyage. I understand—indeed, I understand perfectly, as you'll know soon enough."

"I hadn't expected to be anticipated," Drake said. "You must have acted very quickly indeed, to fit out an expedition on this scale within months—perhaps weeks—of the ethership's destruction. I confess that I can't understand what kind of game Master Dee is playing."

"Dee?" said Muffet. "What has Dee . . .?" He stopped abruptly, perhaps in response to a signal from Gilbert that Drake had not been able to see.

Gilbert made haste to change the subject, perhaps to give Muffet some hint of the reason for his caution. "Captain Drake's vessel, the *Golden Hind*, is uncommonly well-armed," he said. "We'll be grateful of that, Doctor, if relations with the islanders continue to deteriorate. If we can persuade him to stay for a while, his presence will surely make us secure. He might be invaluable to us in other ways too, given his reputation as a diplomat. If he can win over the Tahitians as he won over the Panamanian Cimaroons, we may yet achieve the state of harmony that was our first ambition. I don't think his men will take it too hard if they have to rest up here for a while—they'll find our little paradise very comfortable."

Drake almost frowned then, perceiving a slight hint of threat in the tradesman's final comment, but he dismissed the suspicion along with the expression. "If I can be of service to you," he said, as smoothly as he could, "I'll be glad of the opportunity. I can stay for a month, at least."

"I hope you'll stay a great deal longer than that," Muffet said, in spite of any gesture Gilbert might have made. "I can think of no one better to serve as our ambassador to England, when the time comes to explain to the queen and her council exactly what we've been doing here."

"Indeed," Drake said. "What *have* you been doing here, Doctor Muffet?"

"Nothing less than beginning a revolution in medicine, Captain Drake," Muffet said. "After three thousand years of my forerunners groping in the dark, I believe I've found the key to the health, happiness, and future advancement of humankind."

Doctor Muffet was obviously a Paracelsian in more ways than one; the founder of the school had been renowned for his immodesty. Drake could not help raising his eyebrows at the scope of the claim, but he refused to assume that Thomas Muffet was mad; he knew full well that the universe contained far stranger things than he had ever been able to imagine in his youth. "That's excellent news," he murmured. He took a fruit he did not know from the basket and peered at it. "Is this good for scurvy?" he asked.

"Not as specific as some," Muffet said, "but you need have no fear of any symptoms of that sort while you are here. You'll find that breadfruit quite palatable, I think, and much other local produce too. There'll be roast pork for dinner; the local swine are delicate creatures by comparison with our wild boar, but they're succulent. There'll be fresh eggs, too. You'll have time enough to sample new fish and fruit by the dozen, if not by the hundred."

"May I have another cup of water?" Drake asked. "And might I ask you to send some casks of water and baskets of fruit out to the ship without delay, for the benefit of the watchmen who must remain aboard?"

"It's already done," said Muffet. "Patience, will you fetch the captain another cup of water, please."

"Yes, father," said the little girl, who seemed far meeker in the presence of her parent than she had before.

"If you have men sickening with scurvy, or anything else," Muffet said, "you'd best bring them ashore as soon as it's convenient. I'll be glad to administer what treatments I can. I think you might be surprised by the efficacy of my medicines. Do you have any sickness yourself?"

"Nothing that a warm bath wouldn't cure," Drake said.

"I'll have the servants prepare one," Gilbert was quick to say. "I can have your clothes washed too, and I'll send for a barber."

"That's very kind," Drake said. "Will there still be time for me to see your laboratory before dinner, Doctor Muffet?"

Yet again, Gilbert did not seem overly enthusiastic about that prospect, but the doctor smiled, as if he had been paid a great compliment. "Certainly," he said. "We'll make such time as we may need. I think you'll find my work exciting, Captain Drake—in fact, I'm certain of it."

Drake could not help wondering exactly what the source of that certainty was. It was one thing, he thought, for a man like Muffet not to credit the rumor that he was as mad as a March hare, but quite another for him to be enthusiastic to display his wondrous wares to a man who was—setting all issues of patriotism and derring-do aside—most famous of all for the prodigious quality of his thievery.

4

Doctor Muffet's laboratory was not what Drake expected, but as he had hardly known what to expect, there was no surprise in that. The only workshop he had ever seen that might be entitled to such a name was Tom Digges' establishment in Greenwich, and that had been more like a jeweler's manufactory than an alchemist's lair.

Muffet, as a physician, was fully entitled to be more interested in potions

and powders, and there were plenty of those on display, along with the alembics and mortars necessary to their preparation. What Drake had not expected to see, though, was the great assortment of live creatures mustered in the doctor's outhouses, in all manner of cages and glass vivaria. He had thought the islet he had visited that morning abundantly stocked with parrots and other kinds of birds, but Tahiti itself must have a dozen native species for every one he had seen there, and Muffet appeared to have captured representatives of a substantial fraction of them. It was the large and brightly colored birds that caught Drake's attention first—especially the ones that were not caged, which flew toward them when Muffet, Drake, and Patience stepped across the threshold of the first laboratory.

Patience put up her arm to provide a perch for one of the parrots: a blue and yellow macaw, which seemed even larger than it was in juxtaposition with the slender girl. "Hello, Agamemnon," she said, gaily.

"Hello, Patience," the bird replied.

Drake laughed. He had seen a dozen trained birds in the Caribbean, especially among the Cimaroons, although no man in his own crew had ever tried to tame one.

"Is all well?" Patience asked, taking care to enunciate the words clearly.

"All's well!" the bird squawked—and two or three of its companions repeated the phrase, almost in unison; "All's well!"

"Remarkable!" said Drake—but he was already beginning to look past the birds as the macaw left its makeshift perch for a sturdier one mounted beneath the outbuilding's slanted roof. As he advanced further into the room he saw that the first vivarium he came to was occupied by a company of small lizards—but they could not hold Drake's eye for long, when he perceived that the next one was tenanted by half a dozen spiders. They seemed like giants, until he looked at the next vivarium, which held two specimens of even greater dimension.

It was then that he began to look around more rapidly, in frank alarm, as he realized that among more than fifty glass vessels and twenty wicker cages contained in the room—which only constituted a third of Muffet's research establishment—at least forty contained spiders.

Drake had seen large spiders before, in Panama and Peru, but not like the ones that Thomas Muffet had accumulated in his various enclosures. Their bodies ranged in size from the dimensions of a man's closed fist to the full capacity of a man's head, and the length and sturdiness of their legs increased in proportion. Most were colored in shades of brown, sometimes striped with red, but a few were golden yellow and more elaborately patterned with black and blue.

Patience, who had observed Drake's reflexive reaction, was quick to say: "Don't be afraid, Captain. They're very friendly, although the Indians are terrified of them." She was not merely parroting Thomas Muffet's reassurances, for it was obvious to Drake that the little girl was completely comfortable with the spiders. She moved from vivarium to vivarium and cage to cage, extending her tiny hands toward their various inhabitants without showing the slightest sign of fear or repugnance. Indeed, she was more than willing to take the lids off glass-fronted boxes or unhook the latches of cages to reach into them, allowing specimens that she could not possibly

have held in her tiny hands to climb her arms and sit upon her shoulders.

"Hello, Achilles," she said to one, and "Hello, Hector," to another.

For a split second, Drake almost expected Achilles to say hello in his turn, and Hector to declare that all was well.

Drake had always reckoned himself a brave man, but when Patience extended one of these huge spiders toward him, offering to let him accommodate it on the sleeve of his jerkin, he shook his head in flat refusal.

"You'll get used to them, Captain," Patience assured him. "They never bite unless they feel threatened."

"I'd heard that there was no Englishman more interested in insects than yourself," Drake murmured to Thomas Muffet, making an effort to keep his voice perfectly calm. "I hadn't realized that the interest in question was so closely connected with your medical endeavors."

"Spiders are arachnids, not insects," Muffet told him. "They're entirely distinct, not merely in the number of their limbs and the articulation of their bodies, but in their modes of nourishment. All spiders are predators, but they're only able to consume their food in liquid form. They have no larval stages, as insects have, and the silk they produce has very different properties and uses. The so-called silkworm produces fiber to make the cocoon in which it awaits metamorphosis into its adult form—fruitlessly, when human cultivators intervene—but spidersilk is a versatile construction material used to build cable-like strands, complex webs and exotic funnels. We humans may think all crawling creatures much alike, but from their own viewpoint there's as much difference between insects and spiders as there is between insects and men."

That struck a chord in Drake's mind. Although he had not been present when the incident took place, he had been told that Walter Raleigh had been attacked by a spider on the moon. Digges had mentioned in relating the incident that the multitude of insects and molluscs, which made up the populace of the stars, seemed to look upon spiders with the same horror and repulsion that many humans did.

"Is that creature not poisonous?" Drake asked, unable to prevent his unease becoming manifest as he watched a particularly repulsive specimen crawl out of a capacious cage and along Patience's welcoming arm.

"Not dangerously so," Muffet said. "It's true that many hunting spiders use venom to paralyze their prey, and that humans sometimes react badly to such injections, but in functional terms, spider venom is no more akin to the crude stings of wasps or the toxins secreted by snakes than the species themselves are. Most natural venoms are defensive weapons, but spider secretions need to be a great deal more versatile than that. They have not merely to immobilize their prey but to transform the various flesh of many different species to prepare it for ingestion in liquid form. It's a kind of alchemy of the flesh, whose potential extends far beyond mere murder and digestion."

The monster was sitting on Patience's head now. She moved her head slowly from side to side, her eyes taking on a quizzical expression much like those worn by the parrots that were studying Drake and the spiders, equally warily, from the safety of their perches. Drake felt a sudden and rather absurd sense of fellow-feeling with the birds—who must, he supposed, have

had plenty of time to get used to the company of their fellow guests, but seemed not to have taken the trouble to become very closely acquainted.

"Are you saying that some spider secretions might have curative value?" Drake asked.

"There's no *might* about it," Muffet replied, serenely. "Is that so surprising? There are a thousand plant species whose juices have curative value, as well as a much lesser number that are deadly poisons. Galenists and Paracelsians alike use leeches to draw blood. Like the chemical realm whose treasures were exposed by Paracelsus, the animal kingdom is a vast untapped resource of medical science, which might produce abundant rewards even if one were compelled to explore it blindly, with no other method than trial and error."

Drake knew little enough about Paracelsian medicine, but there had been controversy in abundance when Muffet had initially been refused entry into the Royal College of Physicians, and every educated man in England—not excluding playwrights, choristers, and marine officers—had heard something of the manner in which Paracelsus had determined the propriety of his new chemical cures by means of occult analogies. All occult scientists—alchemists most of all—were holists, who considered that the universe was host to many secret patterns of analogy and influence. If such patterns could be identified linking human illnesses to the new chemical substances that were inflating the traditional lists of metals, salts, and essences, similar patterns could presumably be found linking the same illnesses to different animal species and substances. Drake inferred that Muffet was on the track of some such guiding pattern.

"They say in the Caribbean and Panama," Drake observed, drawn into a tangential train of thought, "that the natives were perfectly healthy until the Spanish came, importing diseases that became terrible plagues. The Cimaroons gave elaborate testimony of their ravages—but I'm told that there are rumors of a different sort in every port in Europe, which say that sailors returning from the Americas brought back plagues of their own."

"Including the one for which Paracelsus pioneered the mercury treatment," Muffet said. "We've had an opportunity to see something similar ourselves. The Tahitians appear to have been relatively free of disease before we arrived, living an idyllic existence in a land whose bounty is more closely akin to the Garden of Eden than anything else on earth—but, after our arrival, sicknesses began to spread. Some among the tribesmen are inclined to blame us for that, although our own people were as healthy as anyone could expect when we arrived here. I've had a good deal of success in treating the sicknesses, and I'm developing new cures at a rapid rate, but the Tahitians' gratitude is understandably dilute. They have much the same attitude to spiders as Englishmen have, and the good example my daughter sets has no more effect on them than it has on you—for I can see that her familiarity in handling my allies adds to the discomfort of your attitude rather than soothes it."

Drake was, indeed, very glad to see Patience divest herself of the huge spider that she had been entertaining for the past ten minutes and replace it gently in a cage whose latch seemed quite secure. He found that his enthusiasm to see Doctor Muffet's laboratory had waned considerably since

he had crossed its threshold, and that an insistent desire had slowly accumulated within him to leave and not come back. "I'm sorry," he said to Muffet. "This is very strange to me, and there's a great deal to take aboard."

"Of course," the doctor said, suavely. "I believe that dinner must be ready by now. Shall we rejoin Sir Humphrey? We have plenty of time, do we not?"

Do we? Drake wondered. He had not yet had time to think about re-making his plans, now that his ambition to be the first European to reach these islands had been thwarted. He had no idea where he ought to go next, or when—but the Austral continent still lay to the west, and two islands in close proximity, each larger than Tahiti. They, at least, might still be awaiting a first visitation by ocean-borne adventurers.

As they went back into Gilbert's house, however, Drake was struck by another thought. "I can understand why you didn't go to the Caribbean or Brazil in search of exotic spiders," he said, "if those which live in England are too small to be of much use to you—the Spanish and the Portuguese would not be good neighbors, no matter how peaceful your intentions. But how did you know that there would be material to suit your purposes here? Even though you knew about the island's existence, you might have found it utterly devoid of spiderkind."

"Spiders are very efficient travelers," Muffet told him. "They're far more widely distributed than you can probably imagine—and in the tropics, they very often grow to generous proportions, as do the insects that provide their primary prey."

"What other kinds of prey do they hunt?" Drake asked, since the question seemed to have been left dangling, and because all sailors had heard travelers' tales about giant spiders that preyed on humankind.

"The largest species can trap small birds and mice," Muffet told him. There was a slight hint of amusement in his voice, which testified to his familiarity with the same travelers' tales. "Nothing bigger—so far as I know."

5

The feast proved too much for Drake's stomach, although he could not help over-eating after such long privation. If he had confined himself to drinking water—as he knew full well that he ought to do—he would probably have kept his appetite in better check, but he was readily persuaded to try some palm wine. Once mild intoxication had taken hold he became too self-indulgent—though not as self-indulgent as the crewmen who were eating in the open air, around a group of cooking-fires, amid a crowd that included numerous young Tahitian women.

As he watched his men through the wide window of Gilbert's dining-room, it occurred to Drake that the natives might have more reasons than their new-found vulnerability to fevers to have taken a dislike to the invaders of their island, but the combination of drunkenness and the gripe soon drove all such serious thoughts from his mind.

In response to polite requests, Drake and Hammond told tales of their adventures in Panama, in which all their fellow guests seemed very interested. No one took the risk of asking him about the far more dramatic

adventure he had experienced after the ethership's ascent, even though they had already told him that they did not agree with those who thought the experience delusional. Drake was grateful for that, although he was aware of the apparent inconsistency. Ashley—who had not sailed with Drake before this present expedition—willingly took on the burden of recounting their recent capture of the Peruvian port, and waxing lyrical about the treachery of the natives of Chile.

Patience Muffet, who was sitting next to Drake, asked him whether he had encountered any monsters like those described in myths and travelers' tales. She seemed sincerely interested.

"The tales that mariners bring back home of terrible islands inhabited by cunning monsters, head-hunting savages, and avid cannibals are mostly lies intended to amuse," Drake told her. "I've never encountered cannibals, or savages who make human sacrifice of all unwary visitors to huge monsters they worship as pagan gods. There's no need, mind, for such fancies as that to express the danger of a seaman's trade; it's a fortunate ship that returns home from an ocean crossing with more than half its crew alive and well. Disease and deprivation claim more lives than violence. The world isn't as hospitable to humankind as we could wish, alas."

"Why do people bring home such terrifying tales, if there's no truth in them?" the girl asked, in a manner whose maturity belied her frail appearance. "Why make the world out to be worse than it is?"

"Travelers exaggerate," Drake said. "In making the world seem stranger, they seek to increase their own apparent importance and bravery."

"The world is a sore trial to humans because we're doing penance for original sin," Gilbert's chaplain put in, having been eavesdropping on their conversation from the other side of the table. He seemed to disapprove of Patience's curiosity—or, at least, of her choice of an instructor.

"If that's so," Drake opined, with reckless honesty, "we're paying very dear for a trivial error. Dante claimed that there was no land in all this ocean but the mount of Purgatory, but you've proved him wrong, haven't you? Another strike against papism!"

The chaplain was not a Puritan of John Field's stripe but a broad churchman. "It might be," the chaplain opined, "that Dante guessed wrongly about the shape and extent of Purgatory."

"You'll find that Tahiti isn't Paradise, Captain Drake," Patience Muffet said, "but it isn't Purgatory either." The judgment seemed bizarrely ominous, from the mouth of such a young child.

"No," Drake agreed. "It's just an island, where there are neither head-hunters nor cannibals nor pagan savages. Even the monsters are friendly, and your father is hopeful that their bites might work benign miracles."

This time it was Muffet who interrupted to say: "There's nothing miraculous about it, Captain Drake. It's merely science."

He would undoubtedly have gone on, but Gilbert put a hand on his arm. "Tomorrow, doctor," he said. "Tonight, let's rejoice in a fortunate meeting of friends and countrymen." He raised his cup as if to signify a compact.

Drake raised his own readily enough, knowing that he had already drunk too much to pay proper attention to, or make proper sense of, any discourse on the technicalities of alchemical medicine.

The feast continued in a hearty mood; even the chaplain relented in the expression of his disapproval.

Drake had no idea what time it was when he took himself off to bed, but darkness had fallen some time before. His hosts would willingly have carried on drinking and chatting for at least another hour, and the party outdoors went on for some while longer, the cooking-fires having been fed further wood in order to serve as central sources of illumination, but the captain was exhausted.

He fell asleep while there was still a great deal of noise and flickering light outside. That did not assist his troubled sleep, which was shallow and dream-filled from the very start. By the time his belly finally settled, however, silence had fallen and the fires had burned down to a sullen red glow that seemed impotent to penetrate the darkness of the tropic night. His stomach's quiescence was, alas, soon displaced as the center of his internal attention by the development of a fierce headache.

There was a nightlight by his bed, so Drake did not have to blunder around in search of the water-jug, but he felt very clumsy as he groped for it. He drank deeply, but that only served to increase the magnitude of yet another problem.

He got up again, wishing that he had paid more attention to the exact position of the latrine that was situated some distance behind the house, not far from the fence, when he had used it in earlier in daylight. He did not bother to put on his jerkin, but he was careful to pull on his boots, not knowing what dangerous creatures might be swarming on the ground behind the house.

He made his way outside, and was glad to find that there was light enough to enable him to find the raised rim of the latrine-pit without overmuch trouble. He still felt rather unsteady on his feet; when his immediate discomfort had been relieved, he moved away from the stinking trench to lean against the bole of a tall palm, intending to gather himself together before he returned to his bed. He looked up at the sky, although he did not expect to find any sense of stability or promise of peace in its celestial majesty.

The southern stars always seemed sparse to him by comparison with those that crowded northern skies, but the weakness of their light was offset by a bright full moon, whose pock-marked silver face was now a stark reminder of the extent and strangeness of the universe. Drake stared at it for a minute or more, resentfully. Digges, he knew, had been promised that the earth would be let alone, but that did not mean that compound eyes were not staring down at the world of men, nor that the multitudinous insect species who thronged the satellite's cavernous interior might not send tiny cousins to the surface to make observations on their behalf.

He looked away deliberately, unwilling to offer himself up as a passive lunatic. The tall wooden fence, some fifteen paces away from his present position, made it impossible for him to see more of the forest than the tops of its trees. The island's birds were mostly silent now, but there was wind enough to sustain a considerable whisper in the foliage, so the wilderness of the island's interior seemed loud and insistent in its presence.

When he felt more composed, Drake turned to go back to Gilbert's

house. Just as he turned his head, though, he saw something move from the corner of his eye. It was very close to the wall of the stockade, almost totally enclosed in shadow; had it remained still he could not possibly have seen it, but the fact and quality of the movement were just about discernible. As soon as he stared at it attentively, though, the movement stopped, leaving him with nothing but the impression of something the size of a man, whose movement was not at all manlike.

Drake could not help the idea of a giant spider—a *true* giant—springing forth from his imagination. Instinctively, he froze, cursing himself for his reflexive terror. He stared hard into the shadows, but he could not make out any shape within the darkness. He tried to force himself to take a step toward it, purely and simply to prove that he had command over his limbs, but his legs would not move.

When he tried to take a step in the other direction, toward the house, he found it far easier—but in taking that step, he turned his head again, and caught a hint of movement from the corner of his eye for a second time. He froze again, and looked back—and then he felt something brush against his calf, above the rim of his boot.

He was immediately seized by the idea that something had already crawled up his boot, unheeded, and was now ascending his leg. Again, he could not help but imagine a spider, albeit a much smaller one than the one he had imagined moving in the shadows.

He dared not reach down with his bare hands. Instead, he shook his leg furiously, hoping to dislodge the creature he supposed to be there. He knew, even as he did it, that it was the wrong thing to do. If there *was* a spider on his leg, the last thing in the world he ought to do was agitate it.

It *was* the wrong thing to do; he felt the sting that told him so—but that only made his agitation more frenzied. He would have called for help had he not been so utterly ashamed of himself—but the one thing he dreaded more, at that moment, than being killed by a spider-bite, was the possibility that he might be wrong: that the whole incident, including the bite, was a product of his imagination. He could not countenance the thought that he might be found hallucinating, especially if the hallucination involved a giant invertebrate.

He felt a second bite, and a third. He was possessed by the thought that there must be more than one spider, and that there might be an entire tide of spiders flowing around his feet. Still he did not dare reach down with his hands. Still he kicked madly in his panic, while trying all the while to stay silent.

Drake began to feel numb in his lower limbs, and dizzy in his fevered brain, and felt that he was losing contact with reality in more ways than one. Then, he did begin to hallucinate.

He dreamed that he had suddenly acquired the ability to see into the shadows, and to distinguish what was there. He did not see man-sized spiders but spiderlike men: three of them, clad like the Tahitian indigenes in loincloths and feathered head-dresses. They were far darker in complexion than the Tahitians, though, and far hairier, with faces that were not human faces at all but monstrous arachnid faces, staring at him and waiting for him to fall.

He dared not look down to see whether he was, indeed, being devoured from beneath by a flood of spiders. He could not look down—but he could fall down, and he felt himself doing so.

As he tumbled, the three spider-faces worn by the violators of the stockade drew closer. He told himself that they must be masks, but then lost the thread of his dreams and thoughts alike.

6

Drake woke up with a start, and found himself fighting to open his eyes against the glare of bright sunlight. Eventually, he managed it. He was on the ground, not lying where he had fallen, but rather in dense undergrowth, which mostly consisted of fern-like fronds and broad prickly leaves. He was lying in a shallow ditch, which might have been a watercourse in the rainy season; it snaked away through the vegetation in two directions.

He raised his head cautiously, but the foliage was too dense to allow him to see more than a few feet without standing up. He paused before doing that, in order to collect himself and decide what to do next. Since his eyes told him so little about where he was, he made an effort to listen carefully, but all he could hear was the clamor of a brisk wind rustling the branches of the trees, mingled with the calls of strange birds and various humming and clicking sounds that were presumably made by unfamiliar insects.

He tried to rise to his feet, but his legs were still numb and he had to pause in an awkward sitting position. He reached down to rub his thighs. He was wearing hose, but there were tears in the thin cloth above the rims of both his boots, and bloodstains. The flesh beneath was itching, and the sensation flared into pain as he brushed the wounds with his fingertips. He had apparently been bitten four times, around and above his knees. He continued rubbing his legs, and felt the flesh respond to the urging. He breathed a sigh of relief as he took further stock of himself, and concluded that any damage done had been temporary.

When he stood up he was able to look over the densest vegetation, but he could only see a few yards further than before, although the forest was not as dense as some he had experienced. To judge by the height of the sun, it had to be nearer noon than dawn.

I must make haste, Drake thought, glad to be able to organize a coherent sentence. *The settlement was on the south-eastern coast of the island, so it ought to lie . . .*

He was interrupted in mid-decision when he suddenly found himself gripped from behind and pulled back down to a sitting position. When he twisted his neck to look over his shoulder he found himself staring into the face of a man.

Drake was so glad to see that the man did not have the face of a spider that three seconds passed before he realized that the other *did* have skin much darker than the natives he had seen in Gilbert's compound, and that he had considerably more body hair. He was, moreover, exceptionally barrel-chested and muscular. He did not seem to belong to the same race as other Tahitians. He was not alone; there were at least three oth-

ers, all crouching down and huddling around. They were breathing hard; he inferred that they had hurried back to him following some alarm.

Drake opened his mouth to speak, but a hand was urgently plastered over it. Another hand reached out to part the vegetation obscuring their position, and a stabbing finger bid him look in that direction. He could just make out the feathery head-dresses of a party of lighter-skinned men making their way along a course that ran more or less parallel the dry stream-bed. He could also see the tips of spears and bows carried by the lighter-skinned Tahitians; they were moving smoothly and silently, as any hunting-party would.

When the other party had vanished, Drake's captors allowed him to stand up again. He tried a soft-voiced greeting in English first, on the assumption that any islanders living in close proximity to the settlement, whatever their physical type, were highly likely to have learned a little. When that overture met with blank incomprehension, he made an elaborate mime of displaying his obvious lack of arms and declaring his peaceful inclinations. He had grown accustomed to the elements of sign language, having always been exceptional among his own people for his enthusiasm to meet exotic specimens of humanity and make alliances with them.

The dumb-show elicited no more reaction than his speech. He was now able to count the number of his captors as seven, but none of them was armed and they did not seem to mean him any harm. Indeed, it was possible that they had protected him by preventing him from attracting the attention of the lighter-skinned islanders. Before looking back at the man who had dragged him down and muffled his mouth, who seemed to be the leader of the party, Drake made a tour of the group with curious eyes. The expressions on their staring faces seemed far more curious than ominous, but Drake had the impression that if he were to try to leave the company he would be restrained.

"You're not local, are you?" he guessed. "Neither servants nor traders. So what do you want with me?" He took care to speak in a soft and amicable tone.

There was no verbal reply, but the first man he had seen gestured with his hand. It was an invitation rather than a command, but Drake did not take the trouble to wonder what the consequences might be of a refusal. He bowed, and immediately went in the direction indicated by the invitation. So far as he could judge, that course would take him in the opposite direction to the settlement, but it could not be helped. The leader of the party fell into step with him, walking by his side, while the others arranged themselves in single file behind.

The trail they followed was not straight, but it was clear enough to permit swift progress until they were diverted on to a narrower sidetrack, where they made slower headway. The leader of the party had to go in front of Drake to guide him. After that, they changed direction so frequently that their course was more reminiscent of a ship tacking into the wind than any journey overland that Drake had ever taken. When they had been moving for two hours they stopped to drink from a stream. Drake realized that they must be carefully avoiding contact with other is-

landers. Although he had caught the odor of cooking-fires more than once, he had not seen a single human habitation.

"You know that I'm a stranger here, don't you?" Drake said to the leader, without any expectation of receiving a reply. "You know that I came aboard the *Golden Hind*. Do you know that I'm her master, or were you merely intent on picking one of us at random?" Voicing the questions helped him to settle in his own mind what the answers might be—but he knew that there was no point in seeking enlightenment by that means as to where the dark men might be taking him, or why.

Eventually, their course became straighter again, and by late morning they did come into a village, where his captors paused to hold discussions with the inhabitants. These were lighter-skinned people who resembled the islanders he had seen in the settlement, not his present companions, but they did not seem to be hostile to his captors. There was no argument, and scant evidence of overmuch curiosity regarding his presence, although some of the villagers studied him surreptitiously while pretending to ignore him.

"Is there anyone here who speaks English?" Drake asked, plaintively, issuing another general appeal. If anyone did, they were not prepared to admit it.

The march resumed. Drake presumed that they were heading ever-deeper into the island's interior, getting further away from the settlement. He spared time from contemplation of his own predicament to wonder what Gilbert would think when he found that his honored guest had vanished—and, for that matter, what Hammond and Ashley would think when they found themselves devoid of a captain.

They went through two more villages before noon, and a third not long after. Drake was offered fruit to eat and water to drink, but he ate sparingly. The expedition had become tedious now, and he began to wish that it might be over—or, at least, that he might be able to ask when it might be over.

There did not seem to be nearly so many birds hereabouts as there had been on the small islet where Martin had climbed the coconut palm—perhaps because the birds here were much more inclined to steer clear of humans, for reasons to which the natives' feathered head-dresses offered more than adequate testimony. There were, however, large parrots visible in the crowns of the trees, which paused to watch the party of travelers as they passed by rather than taking immediate flight—except for one, which was actively following them. At first Drake thought that he must be mistaken about that, but once he began to keep the bird within view, it soon became obvious that he was right. The bird was definitely tracking them. Drake could not tell whether his companions were aware of the fact or not, but if they were it did not worry them.

For the first time, it occurred to Drake to wonder why the *Fortune* had set off from Gilbert's harbor, heading directly for the island where the *Hind* had dropped anchor, before anyone could possibly have caught sight of her. Was it possible, he wondered, that news of her arrival there had been carried from one island to another by a bird? He had not paid much attention to the birds in Muffet's laboratory, even though Patience had talked to one of them, once his attention had been claimed by the spiders.

Now he began to wonder whether he had been distracted from something significant, and cursed himself for his carelessness.

Travelers' tales featuring intelligent birds were by no means as common as those involving giant spiders, but they were not unknown. Perhaps, Drake thought, there was more truth in such tales than he had ever been able to credit. Given that the caverns of the moon were host to vast throngs of philosophical insects, the notion of whole nations of talking birds no longer seemed as silly as it would have done in his days as the scourge of the Carib Sea.

For at least six hours he had not seen a single spider, but that changed quite suddenly when the terrain underwent a marked change of aspect. They had been going up-slope for some time and the forest had thinned out considerably—not because trees had been deliberately cleared, as they had around the villages, but because the trees that grew on this higher ground had massive superficial root-systems than monopolized the soil for some distance around, permitting no competitors. These roots formed complex networks of ridges and deep grooves, and were host to elaborate populations of fern-like plants, mosses, brightly colored fungi, and swarms of insects. Here, for the first time since his strange awakening, Drake was able to see spiders prowling in broad daylight, though none were as large as the ugliest specimens in Muffet's collection. He saw webs, too, although they were not like the webs spun by garden spiders in England; they were built on the ground and extended in mazy tunnels and strange spirals.

The walls of these tunnels were sufficiently substantial that they might almost have served as the sleeves of garments, but they were slightly translucent, so that it was sometimes possible to see dark shapes confined within them, which might have been the spiders themselves, or the corpses of the kinds of animal prey that Muffet had mentioned: small birds and mice. Despite his booted feet, Drake took great care not to step on any spiders. The natives seemed far less careful, although they went barefoot.

The terrain changed again as the party finally went over the crest of the shallow hill they had been climbing, and came down more precipitously into a valley whose vegetation was quite distinct from any they had yet traversed. There were no palm trees here, although there were trees that bore fruits that Drake had never seen before; they did not grow as tall as palms, but their foliage was more prolific. Many of the bushes bore huge flowers, of very various colors, and the air was alive with the buzz of insects. Drake had been badly bitten in the swamplands of Panama, and he was initially apprehensive of the swarms of flies, but they did not seem inclined to molest him.

The going became much harder once they had descended into the valley, but there was a trail of sorts, which Drake's guide followed unhesitatingly, and the seaman followed without too much difficulty. There seemed to be no villages here, and Drake had persuaded himself that it was merely a margin to be crossed when he suddenly emerged into a clearing where there was a group of huts. He knew immediately that some European hand had been involved in their design and construction, although he did not recognize the half-human figure that came out of one of the huts to meet them as a European.

The man seemed, at first glance, to be similar in type to Drake's companions; his skin had the same dark coloring, although it seemed somewhat coarser in texture, and it was also very hairy. Like them he was ugly, in a straightforwardly human fashion, although his features seemed more considerably distorted. His forehead was bulbous and his jaw unusually narrow. He was not dressed as the natives were, though; he had canvas trousers, a cotton chemise, and a broad-brimmed hat. Clothed as he was, it was easy to determine that he had the same exceptional development of the torso and thighs.

It might have been the narrowness of the jaw that imparted a flute-like quality and a slight lisp to the voice that said: "It's good to see you, Francis, old friend. I had a presentiment that you would come—and it seems that you've arrived in the nick of time."

"Old friend?" the astonished Drake repeated. "I'd surely remember if I'd ever seen a man like you before, let alone numbered one among my friends."

"I've changed more than a little since you saw me last," the other admitted. "Perhaps I'm being presumptuous, though, in addressing you as *friend* rather than *shipmate*. It was three years ago that you saw me last, as the calendar counts, but it was in another life as well as another world."

"God's blood!" Drake exclaimed, not knowing exactly how he had jumped to the conclusion. "You're Walter Raleigh!"

7

"I knew that Gilbert would be discreet," the much-changed Raleigh remarked, "but I thought Muffet might have found an opportunity to say something. I told him long ago that you were mariner enough to have taken full note of what you saw from the ethership's portholes. Given that you'd already looked on the Pacific from Panama, I suspected that you'd come exploring if you could."

"If you reached the ground safely when the ethership broke up," Drake said, angrily, "why didn't you return to London? I was in dire need of your testimony to support the story I told. Had you been there to support my testimony, it would have been manifest that it was poor Digges, not I, who was deluded about the nature of our adventure."

"You may be giving our fellow Englishmen too much credit for credulity," Raleigh replied. "I didn't know what would happen to you, and I regret that it did, but I had more urgent things to do. In truth, I wasn't entirely displeased when news reached me of the trick that the ethereal had played on Tom Digges. There are good reasons for maintaining secrecy in regard to the work that Muffet and I must do—for some years, at least. You, though, are one of the few men who might understand. I really am glad to see you, Francis, for there's no man on earth who might make us a better ally, and we're direly in need of one just now. I know that the celestial spiders didn't bring you here, but since you *are* here, they must have Providence on their side."

"Did celestial spiders bring *you* here?" Drake asked.

"Yes," Raleigh replied unequivocally. "Walk with me, and I'll show you what you need to see while I tell you what you ought to know. We've no shortage of hapless instruments, but to have another free man in our innermost company will be an immense advantage."

As he spoke, Raleigh beckoned Drake to follow him deeper into the valley, then made a signal to the leader of the company that had brought Drake from the settlement. The natives were as silent now as they had been since Drake first saw them, and they made no audible response to the signal, but merely retreated to the huts surrounding Raleigh's.

Drake was in a mulish mood now, though, and he stayed where he was. "You sent those men to kidnap me," he said, darkly, "and you sent some monster with them to render me unconscious. Why?"

"It was the simplest way to bring you here quickly—perhaps the only way. Had my emissaries come openly, the rebel islanders would have been alerted, and Gilbert would have done his best to keep you inside the stockade. He may think of you merely as heaven-sent reinforcements for the defense of his petty fort, but he might be hatching other schemes. Muffet still has confidence in him, but I cannot. Gilbert's plans might be agreeable to me, in the right circumstances—but that depends on you, and on the Tahitians' response to your arrival."

"The islanders seemed friendly enough last night," Drake observed.

"Everyone is friendly while gathering intelligence," Raleigh said. "It's possible that your arrival will inhibit the natives from attacking the settlement, but it's also possible that it will increase their sense of urgency. If they imagine that more ships are likely to arrive in future, bringing more guns..."

"We must talk to them," Drake was quick to say. "We must reassure them that we can co-exist peacefully."

"We did that when we first came," Raleigh told him, bluntly. "The islanders believed us, and all went well... but many of the islanders now consider that our promises were false, and they know that there's dissent among the ranks of Gilbert's men. Sailors are a superstitious breed; many of them can't understand what we're doing here, or why, any better than the natives. You will—if you'll allow me to show you. Will you come?"

This time, Drake consented to go where the strangely transformed Raleigh led him. By the time they had taken a dozen steps the huts were out of sight again, screened by the luxuriant bushes. The air was still abuzz with insects, though, drawn to the gigantic blooms that dressed the bushes in such awesome profusion. Their nectar-collection was not un-hazardous, though; now that Drake had become accustomed to the rich confusion of colors he was able to make out predatory spiders lurking in the foliage of the bushes, ready to seize prey that settled in the alluring blossoms.

"Beautiful, are they not?" Raleigh said, as he followed the direction of Drake's gaze. Drake knew that he was not referring to the flowers.

The trail they followed was neither wide nor straight, but the mossy ground was gentle underfoot, and Drake was able to stroll in perfect comfort.

"So the spider-bite you suffered on the moon was no superficial

scratch," he deduced, "and our insect hosts were wrong to believe that they had countered its effects."

"The colonists of the moon's interior think themselves extremely wise and capable," Raleigh said, "and the fleshcores that rest in perfect peace within the shells of planetary crusts in the central regions of the sidereal system are even more given to self-satisfaction. They consider themselves rulers of the galaxy and the forefront of evolution's thrust, but they're blind to all manner of other possibilities. They know relatively little about the remoter regions of the galactic arms, let alone the vast realm of the ethereals. They know almost nothing about the imperium of spiderkind."

"You're some kind of chimera now, I suppose?" Drake guessed. "The spider must have laid eggs inside your body, which took possession of your flesh much as the ethereal took possession of poor Digges' intelligence, albeit in a slower manner."

Raleigh laughed. "You see that I'm changed," he said, "but you mistake the reason. No, I'm not possessed by one of Field's ingenious extraterrestrial demons. The spider laid no eggs within my flesh. The spiders that rode down to earth with me traveled as passengers on the ethership, just as we humans did. They played their part in saving all of us, slowing the leak with spidersilk long enough for us to reach an altitude at which the parachutes could save our lives. Had it not been for them, you'd likely be dead, although you never suspected their presence. They had to be discreet, you see, for they had been spies within the moon for many years, always in hiding from the insects. They took a considerable risk, in order to make use of an unexpected opportunity to descend to the surface of the Earth. They would have come eventually, of course, but they knew that the ethership's journey would provoke a response from the selenite host, and they had to be bold. They're few in number, and their work is patient by nature—my own optimization has been a slow process, and not painful—but they needed to act, lest an unprecedented opportunity be lost."

"Optimization?" Drake queried. "Is that what has happened to you, Walter? And to the men who brought me here, I presume? They're not a different race at all—merely islanders who've been bitten by celestial spiders." It occurred to Drake, as he said this, that he too had been bitten, four times over, by spiders whose origin and nature he could not specify—but he reassured himself with the thought that Muffet appeared to be as tightly bound in this conspiracy as Raleigh, without him or his daughter having been transformed.

"Sentient spider species are despised fugitives within the fleshcores' galactic empire," Raleigh told him, "as humans and other vertebrate intelligences are bound to become, if the insects and their masters have their way. The celestial spiders have survived and flourished regardless, their evolutionary impetus enhanced by the necessity of their eternal struggle. They're our natural allies, Francis—far more so than the ethereals, whose penchant for trickery and treachery is obvious in what they did to Digges. The celestial spiders haven't attempted any deception since they had to make their first move under extremely difficult circumstances. They've been honest with me, and with Muffet—with Gilbert too, although he's never been able to overcome his instinctive revulsion. That

instinct is a direly unfortunate thing, although we humans—some of us, at any rate—seem better able to overcome it than the insect races that comprise the dominant galactic civilization."

"If God engraved a fear of spiders in our instinct," Drake observed, "there might be a reason for it." As he spoke he had his eye on an unusually brightly colored specimen that was not in hiding, but hanging from a thick thread from the branch of a tree, apparently ready to drop from above on some unsuspecting prey.

"That kind of fear is not God's work," Raleigh told him. "It's a phantom of the imagination. The intelligence of Earthly spiders, like that of Earthly insects, remains undeveloped, while that of vertebrates has flourished, by virtue of some unfathomable quirk of local circumstance—but the celestial spiders are rivals of a powerful enemy of humankind, and will be exceedingly valuable allies in times to come. I'd have thought that the man reputed to have turned the Cimaroons into a fledgling nation ready to aid the English against the empire-building Spaniards might understand that."

"You mistake me, Walter," Drake told him. "I never set out to be a diehard enemy of the Spaniards. I wouldn't have attacked them so violently in Panama had I not been so cruelly betrayed at St. John de Ulua. I'm a peaceful man, who would far rather deal honorably with everyone."

"But that's exactly what Digges attempted to do with the insects and the fleshcores," Raleigh pointed out. "They promised him safety and honorable dealing, but they sabotaged the ethership, intending to kill us all."

"Did they?" Drake countered. "I don't know that."

"But you do know that the ethereal—the vaporous creature that Digges breathed in—betrayed him by persuading him that our experience was all a dream. It betrayed *you*, Francis, in making you seem a fool."

"And you didn't?" Drake retorted. "I was convinced that you were dead, for I couldn't believe that you would have deserted me when I needed your testimony to establish my sanity. If I hadn't had your map . . ." He did not break off because he regretted the revelation that it was Raleigh's sharp eyes rather than his own that had guided him to Tahiti, but because he had caught his first glimpse of the wonders that Raleigh must have brought him here to see.

They had come into another clearing, where the ground was damp around the rim of a little pool, whose surface was strewn with lily-pads. On slightly drier ground, cushioned with moss, a dozen Tahitian natives, of the kind Raleigh called "optimized"—six of whom were female—were lying fully extended, seemingly asleep, with their arms extended. Each human body was marked with between five and ten of what Drake thought at first were dark red tumorous growths.

After a minute or so, he realized that the objects were not growths at all, but stout leeches and massive ticks, each the size of a clenched fist, every one of which must have drawn a generous cupful of blood from its host. He was able to watch sated parasites withdraw, slowly and sluggishly as they completed their feasts, and roll on to the ground—but whether they intended to scuttle or squirm away thereafter, he could not tell, for as soon as they fell they were seized and carried off by huge spiders, which bore them away into the shelter of the surrounding bushes.

The bushes and trees on the far side of the pool were lavishly supplied with spidersilk structures, including webs, domes, and tunnels, intricately distributed between the undergrowth and the crowns of the trees. Drake was immediately struck by the notion that here was an entire city spun from spidersilk, extending as far as the eye could see. The structures became much more voluminous and mazy as they extended into the distance, drowning the greens of the forest in a vast extent of shimmering white.

The spiders collecting the bloodsucking parasites were not as huge as the largest specimens Muffet had shown him, but very nearly so. If the increasing size of the tunnels that extended away from the pool's edge was a reliable indication, Drake thought, there must be true giants at the heart of the labyrinth.

8

“**A**re your celestial spiders in that silken maze?” Drake asked, croaking slightly because his mouth was dry.

“Yes,” Raleigh said, “but the products of earthly Creation are far more numerous. The celestial spiders are not the largest, by any means—earthly spiders have more scope for physical optimization than I supposed at first. Although our project is still in its infancy, it’s making rapid and spectacular progress. Ours is a world with more exotic potential than our friends have ever found before; it will take them centuries to discover what might be achieved here in Tahiti, let alone the entire surface of the globe—but you and I might live long enough to see it, if we and they are granted time enough to complete our experiments.”

Drake had returned his attention to the languid islanders and their patient parasites. “And if we were to live for centuries,” he said, grimly, “how much blood would we have to produce to feed your celestial spiders?”

“You misunderstand what is happening here,” Raleigh said. “The celestial spiders have neither any need nor any appetite for human blood, although they consider it a privilege to share the alchemical potential of our flesh, as we should consider it a privilege to share the alchemical potential of theirs. Arachnids are exoskeletal creatures, like insects and molluscs, but they’re very different in other ways. The blood that you see being taken here is destined to nourish earthly spiders, not extraterrestrial ones, and it’s transmitted by vectors in order to protect its donors from excessive traffic in the elixirs of life.”

While Drake watched, one of the male “donors” rose to his feet, having shed all his visitors. He seemed steady enough on his feet, but his eyes were dull. He did not look at Drake before walking into the bushes and being lost to sight.

“Your optimized friends aren’t very talkative,” Drake observed.

“They still converse with one another, and with their former brethren, in their own tongue,” Raleigh said. “They have had no need to learn English to communicate with me; we have other methods. Spiders are voiceless, of course, nor do they have the kinds of sensitive palps that the senile insects used to converse with Tom Digges, but they have very

efficient modes of communication, which humans can learn—optimized humans, at least. When we first returned to earth, my celestial companions had no alternative but to use me a trifle brutally, but they were as discreet as they could be. Once they were able to set me free, they did. I can converse with them now as one free individual to another."

Drake felt free to doubt that—and, indeed, to doubt that Raleigh was anything more than a mere puppet, set out to seduce co-operation from him as cooperation had clearly been seduced from Thomas Muffet. He had to begin walking again, though, because Raleigh was on the move once more, skirting the pond as he went on into the valley.

They moved between the spidersilk structures easily at first, because those clinging to the ground were low-lying and those constructed in the crowns of bushes and trees were limited to the foliage, but their own relative status as giants was rapidly diminished as the arachnid city grew in dimension. The silken structures soon loomed up to chest- and head-height, and they moved into a translucent labyrinth that confused Drake's eyes completely.

"Did Muffet talk to you about his work?" Raleigh asked, as they plunged into the heart of this bizarre environment.

"He showed me his laboratories," Drake replied. "He told me that various sorts of spider venom have curative powers, and that he's attempting to refine them, with the ultimate intention of returning to England equipped with a miraculous pharmacopeia. I assume that he'll do everything possible to demonstrate the efficacy of his cures before revealing their source."

"That's one aspect of our plan," Raleigh agreed, "and one of our reasons for doing our work in such a remote location. There were too many spies in England for there to be any possibility of working there."

"When you say *spies*," Drake said, "I take it that you're not referring to Elizabethans, Frenchmen, or Italians? You mean agents of the lunar insects and their fleshcore masters."

"Yes," said Raleigh. "Ethereals too, in all likelihood, although they find the surface of the Earth just as uncomfortable as exoskeletons accustomed to working in environments where affinity is far less powerful. Earthly insects and spiders are limited in size by a number of environmental factors, you see—especially the load-bearing capacity of their limbs and the difficulty of distributing vital spirit to their tissues."

"What vital spirit?" Drake asked.

"The vital spirit that's contained in air and ether, deprived of which living organisms must die. It is the fuel that feeds the fire of life. Organisms heavily burdened by affinity, as we are, require beating hearts and a sturdy network of vessels carrying blood, which absorbs vital spirit in the lungs and releases it throughout the body. Earthly invertebrates are tiny because, by some freak of chance, their ancestors never developed the appropriate combination of load-bearing limbs and internal circulatory systems. Physical optimization requires ingenious compensation in these and other respects. Relatively few intelligent extraterrestrials can operate comfortably on the surface of a planet like the earth—but the purposes of espionage are, in any case, best served by tinier agents. Communication is a problem, of course, but there are means.

"Humans were under observation before, but since our intrepid band of companions broke through the envelope of the atmosphere, interest in surface affairs has increased very markedly. It now extends beyond mere measurement of our technical works to attempts to comprehend our culture, religion, and politics. England, especially, is under intensive study, and her rival European nations too. Tahiti is safely remote, but I dare not offer the same guarantee in respect of China or Peru. Tell me, Francis, how many people in England knew that you were coming here when you set off from Plymouth?"

"None," Drake admitted. "Being widely considered a madman, I thought it politic to keep the exact details of my plan to myself at first. I didn't confide them to my officers until we reached South America,"

"That's good news," Raleigh said. "I'm glad to find your reasoning so closely in tune with ours—it makes me even more confident that you'll understand what we are doing, when everything has been properly explained. You'll see that the celestial spiders are honest, and that you mustn't let irrational instinctive anxieties blind you to their benevolence."

Drake suppressed a shudder caused by movements glimpsed behind the walls of spidersilk that now surrounded them. Some of the vague shapes he glimpsed through their translucent walls seemed as large as sheep—larger, at any rate, than wolves. He had not yet met any such creature face-to-face, but their reluctance to come out into the open, while lurking like shadows behind such frail walls, only made them seem more menacing. It did not seem to Drake that his fears were dismissible as "irrational instinctive anxieties"; it seemed perfectly rational to doubt that the extraterrestrial spiders were benevolent in their intentions, and to suspect that Raleigh and Muffet were their dupes rather than their collaborators.

"I can't guarantee, of course, that there are no subtle spies lurking unsuspected in my holds," Drake said. "You and Muffet have evidently succeeded in optimizing birds as well as spiders, and use them to gather intelligence. The *Golden Hind* has the usual complement of weevils and flies, any one of which might have descended from the moon. I have no idea how one of your so-called ethereals might be able to conceal itself."

"It's not improbable that you have insect spies aboard," Raleigh admitted. "You're probably being monitored as closely as Tom Digges—but we have servants who could clean your ship of that kind of presence. As for ethereal observers, we have little more reliable knowledge of their capabilities than you do. All we know for sure is that the ethereals have internecine struggles of their own to contend with, which distract them from the affairs of solid creatures and make it unlikely that they'll interfere with us. In that respect, at least, the celestial spiders have more in common with fleshcore society than ours; their vast empire is fundamentally harmonious. Prepare yourself, Francis—we're about to . . ."

He did not break off his sentence, but the sound of his next few words was drowned by a loud explosion, which Drake initially mistook for cannon-fire. It was followed by a cacophony of other sounds and bizarre manifestations. Flaming missiles of various sorts flew through the air, seemingly converging on their position from several different directions. Some were circular bundles, some were spears—but all of them were wrapped

in combustible materials that must have been soaked in some kind of flammable fluid, for they were all burning excitedly.

The spidersilk making up the structures comprising the vast nest was no more vulnerable to fire than seasoned wood, but nor was it any more fire-proof. Where the tunnel walls caught fire they began to burn. Some of the fires sputtered out, but others caught hold, fanned by the steady wind.

"The fools!" Raleigh gasped, when he had recovered from his initial astonishment. "The stupid, reckless fools!" Then he grabbed Drake by the arm, and began pulling him toward a curtain-like gathering of white fabric that was presumably an entrance into the network of the tunnels. "Run!" he commanded. "Run for your life!"

9

Drake had no more than a second to make his decision, and it was instinct rather than reason that guided him. He wrenched his arm free from Raleigh's grip, turned on his heel and ran for his life, heading back the way they had come rather than following the route he had been urged to take by his former crewmate.

Raleigh howled an objection, but Drake had established a lead of six or seven paces before the dark-skinned man set off in pursuit.

The air was already filling with acrid smoke, and there were more fires ahead of him than there were behind, but Drake was not intimidated by that. He could not have retraced his steps from memory, but he had only to run between the walls of spidersilk while the way was clear. Alas, the way was not clear for long, and he had to cut across one of the tunnels, through a gap cleared by fire. It would have been easy enough to accomplish had he been unobstructed, but, as he moved between the flaming edges, a spider the size of a mastiff came hurtling out of the tunnel, similarly intent on escaping. It made no attempt to bite him, and probably did what it could to avoid him, but a glancing collision was inevitable.

The spider's limbs probably suffered more damage than Drake, but the creature was only briefly interrupted in its flight, while Drake stumbled and sprawled on the ground—and when he got up, he had fragments of sticky spidersilk clinging to his arms, shoulders, and face. In order to protect his eyes from the trailing threads he closed them—and then tried to open them by the merest crack so that he could see where he was going.

He was still running as fast as he could, and was able to see that he had now won clear of the head-high tunnels into a region where most were no higher than his waist. Many seemed to be collapsing even where they had not been ripped or singed, and he was able to hurdle two that sprawled across his path. He tried to do the same with a third, but could not clear it, and, when his booted feet plunged through the fragment, its glue-like strands wrapped themselves around his ankles and calves. He stumbled again, and this time fell upon a white carpet, which caught his arms as his feet had earlier been trapped.

As he struggled to free himself, Drake saw a huge black spider scuttling toward him, and felt certain that he was about to be bitten—but the

monster ran straight over him without pausing. He began to pick himself up and pull himself free, but he turned as he heard a shout and saw Walter Raleigh behind him, amid a billowing cloud of white smoke, standing some ten or twelve yards away, gesticulating urgently.

"This way, you fool!" Raleigh yelled.

Drake could not have obeyed the instruction had he wanted to, for his feet were still impeded by the clinging spidersilk. He was about to signal his refusal, though, when a spear hurtled out of the smoke. This one was unencumbered by any burning material, and its sharpened wooden point struck Raleigh in the torso, apparently passing between his ribs,

Drake ducked low, expecting the weapon to be the first of a shower, and brought up his arms to shield his head. No other spears passed over him, though. Instead, it was a seeming tide of living flesh—bronze flesh, not dark brown or sunburned white—that seethed out of the surrounding bushes, and a dozen grasping hands reached out to seize him and pluck him from the ground, dragging him away from the web that had trapped him.

It required more than a minute for Drake to realize that he was not in imminent danger of death, and that the men who had seized him were intent on carrying him away alive. Once he was sure of that, he wondered whether his new captors might have mounted their attack in order to rescue him from what they imagined to be deadly peril—but that seemed too optimistic an analysis.

As soon as the men carrying him set him on his feet again—which they did not do until they were clear of the valley that Raleigh and the celestial spiders had adopted as their home—Drake tried to thank them, but they were not immediately interested in conversation. One said: "Follow! Hurry!" If that was not the limit of his English, he was not presently disposed to say any more.

Having little alternative, if only because there were as many islanders behind him as before him, Drake followed the man who had spoken, and hurried as rapidly as his captors. He had lost his bearings completely, and did not know which way he was being taken. The sun was too close to its zenith for him to make an accurate judgment of their heading.

By the time their headlong flight slowed to a walk there were a dozen Tahitians with Drake, forming a virtual phalanx around him as they strode over the ground, so rapidly that he could hardly keep pace. Breathless as he was, he tried again to talk to them, but their only reply was to impress the urgency of the situation upon him with gestures. It was obvious by now that they meant him no immediate harm, but it seemed more likely that they had seized him as a hostage than that they had merely sought to rescue him. Even if that were so, he thought, he was probably better off than he had been in the heart of the arachnid city.

When his captors brought him out of the forest into the largest native village he had yet seen—the first to be surrounded by a defense of sorts, and to show signs of concerted agricultural endeavor within and without that boundary—he saw that there were men waiting to receive him. They were all natives, but several were wearing linen shirts and treads. He was less pleased to observe that two were in possession of muskets, and several more of machetes.

He was received with some formality—ceremony, even. The leader of the party that was waiting for him made an elaborate show of welcome even before he said: "You are Captain Drake."

"I am," Drake confirmed, and waited politely for the other to reveal his own name.

"I am Ruhapali," the islander told him, gravely. "I speak for many tribes."

"I'm honored to meet you," Drake assured him. "What do you want with me?"

"My people saved you," Ruhapali stated, making an obvious bid for the moral high ground.

"I'm grateful," Drake said. He did not say that the islanders had also imperiled him by attacking the spiders, because he was not sure exactly what the islanders were claiming to have saved him from. He had no idea what might have happened to him had Raleigh actually been able to introduce him to the celestial spiders, although he suspected that the process of his "optimization" might have been initiated without much delay.

"You must go away from here," Ruhapali said, coming to the point. "Your ship, and the others too. You must all go. We will kill the spiders. We do not want to kill your people. We will take you to your ship, but you must give us guns. We will give you food and fresh water, but you must give us guns. Then you must go. All of you."

The last thing that Drake wanted was to involve himself in a war, especially one in which he did not know how many sides there might be, and who might rally to what banner. "Have your people attacked the settlement?" he asked.

"No," Ruhapali told him. "Your people are not our enemies—not all. Many will be glad to go. You have seen the reason."

Drake knew that most, if not all, of the *Golden Hind's* crew would probably agree with that judgment, if he told them what he had discovered. He had seen enough to be almost certain in his own mind that he did not want to stay on the island—but he could not be certain that he had seen enough to make a fully-reasoned decision. "Your warriors killed Walter Raleigh," he observed, playing for time while he tried to clear his mind and formulate a plan. "Do you know Raleigh? The white man who became dark—just as some of your own people have become dark?"

"The man who brought the master-spiders," the Tahitian chieftain said. "If he lives, he must go. Better that he dies. The doctor too—but if he goes, that is your business."

"I understand," Drake told him. "What about those among your own people who have been transformed? Is *that* your business?"

"Yes," Ruhapali told him. "We will take you to your ship now. Your people will give us guns."

Drake was not about to start bargaining as to how many guns he might be worth. He nodded his head, to signify that he was content to be taken to his ship. He believed that he understood what was happening here, although he had only met Humphrey Gilbert a little more than twenty-four hours ago. The islanders' discomfort regarding their various exotic visitors must have been growing apace for some time, as they observed what was happening in the valley where the celestial spiders had taken up res-

idence. They could understand readily enough that there would be more and more dark men as time went by, and they presumably feared—rightly or wrongly—that their entire population might eventually be absorbed into the converts' ranks.

Thus far, they had been biding their time, but the arrival of the *Golden Hind* had spurred them to precipitate action. They must have been afraid that Drake and his crew might have been persuaded to reinforce the spiders' allies—in which case, the prospects of any future rebellion succeeding would be considerably more remote.

Drake could imagine with what avidity the native servants had eavesdropped on conversations the night before—not just the tales that Hammond and Ashley had told at Gilbert's table, but the boasts of his crewmen to the crewmen of the *Fortune* and her fellows. The islanders probably had no notion of the quantity and quality of Drake's firepower, but they obviously knew the value of guns, even in a war against giant spiders.

Ruhapali had said that many of the settlers would be glad to go, and Drake did not doubt it, no matter how little they knew about the celestial spiders. Muffet and Raleigh, rather than Humphrey Gilbert, were presumably the masters of the little colony, but their authority must have been undermined by their hirelings' gradual realization of the true purpose of their adventure. Like Drake, Gilbert's men would inevitably have leapt to the conclusion that Muffet and Raleigh might be mere instruments of the celestial spiders, having been bribed with promises of cures for all manner of human diseases, from the rheum to the plague—and the curse of aging too, if Raleigh's bluster about living for centuries could be trusted.

Even if their instinctive revulsion could be set aside, mariners were a cynical and superstitious breed; Gilbert's seamen would have found it direly difficult to believe in the benevolence of spiders, and they might find it far easier to suspect that a physician like Muffet and a petty aristocrat like Raleigh had sold their souls to the Devil. Raleigh seemed entirely convinced that the kind of "optimization" that he had undergone was a gift worth bringing to the whole of humankind, but its stigmata would inevitably seem diabolical to many people—a number by no means restricted to puritans of John Field's stripe.

Drake had no way of knowing whether Field's account of the ether-ship's journey had been taken more seriously than his own, but John Foxe was the Archbishop of Canterbury, whose declarations on spiritual matters carried enormous weight in England. It might, therefore, be extremely hazardous for any Englishman to side with Raleigh and Muffet in this matter, even if reason did turn out to favor their alliance.

Ruhapali had turned to his fellows after Drake's consenting nod, in order to talk to them in their own language, but the discussion did not last long before he turned back to Drake and said: "You will tell your people they must go. We will give you what you need. You will give us what we need. Then we will kill the spiders."

Again, Drake nodded his head, although he did not consider the gesture to constitute a binding agreement.

It occurred to him, though, as they set off on the march again, that if the celestial spiders really did need to be killed, and their schemes abort-

ed, then the sensible strategy might be for the *Golden Hind's* crew to ally themselves with the Tahitians—just as Drake and another crew had once allied themselves with the Cimaroons, in order to carry through a mission in which either company would have failed had they attempted it without the other.

10

Ruhapali and four other chiefs set out to accompany Drake, with an escort of thirty warriors. The first stage of their journey turned out to be longer than he had hoped, but not as long as he had feared. They reached a village on the coast in mid-afternoon, without having been harassed by any dark men or spiders—or, for that matter, followed by any over-attentive birds.

There were a dozen large canoes drawn up on the beach, but they did not take to the water immediately. Ruhapali had first to enter into negotiations with the village chieftain, who was evidently not party to his council of war.

Drake was grateful for the pause, for it gave him time to slake his hunger and thirst and to rest his weary feet. The village children clustered round him, laughing and staring. They must have seen other Europeans, but perhaps not at such close range. He entertained them as best he could with smiles and gestures. Arrangements were eventually made for the use of one of the canoes; Drake boarded it, along with eleven other men, including Ruhapali and three other tribal chiefs.

The fully-laden canoe was not as fast as Drake's pinnace, even when the pinnace carried no sail, because the paddles plied by the islanders were less efficient than English oars. The water was tranquil, though, and the men were experienced.

Again, the journey was longer than Drake could have hoped, and the sun was touching the horizon when the masts of the *Golden Hind* and Humphrey Gilbert's four ships finally came in view, although the moon was rising by way of small compensation. Soon thereafter, Drake saw that there were forty more canoes waiting in the vicinity of the harbor mouth, apparently ready to mount an attack if the order were given.

Were such a meager and disadvantaged force to attack the *Hind* in daylight, the result would be a massacre, but Drake was well aware that a night attack might be a different matter. In any case, he and his crew could not win a war of attrition fought over weeks or months against the entire population of an island of this size.

Ruhapali was careful to approach the *Golden Hind* from the seaward side, and discreetly. The canoe's approach was quickly observed by the ship's watchman, who had plenty of time to see that Drake was in the canoe and not in any distress before Ruhapali ordered the paddlers to ease down, some thirty yards from the ship's stern.

"Speak to them," Ruhapali commanded.

"Mr. Hammond!" Drake called, seeing the mate come to the stern. "These men have rescued me from danger and brought me home. They mean no harm, and no one is to act against them."

"I'm exceedingly glad to see you, sir," Hammond called back. "There was panic ashore when you were nowhere to be found—more among Gilbert's men than your own, since we've grown used to trusting you in such situations. I see that you've been making friends, as is your habit. Will you all come aboard?"

"No," Ruhapali said to Drake, in a low voice. "You must give us guns. Then we will go. We will bring food and water. You will give us more guns."

"No, Ruhapali," Drake said, in his turn. "You will let me go aboard my ship. It will be best if you come too, although that is your choice. Then we will summon Humphrey Gilbert and Thomas Muffet, and we will talk. I mean you no harm, but I must hear what they have to say before I decide what to do. The best thing of all would be for everyone here to agree what is to be done, but we cannot achieve that if you make threats now. Come aboard my ship, and I will mediate between you and Gilbert. If Gilbert is persuaded to leave, Muffet will have no choice but to go with him. If you supply us with what we need to make the voyage, we will trade guns—but until then, we must keep them for our own defense."

Ruhapali did not like these terms, but he had to consider them carefully—and he decided in the end that the alternative would be worse, given that it would win him no weapons and might make him some awkward enemies. He agreed to Drake's terms, and boarded the *Golden Hind* with its captain, while the canoe and his fellow chiefs waited alongside.

"How many men have we aboard, Ned?" Drake asked, as soon as the two of them were on the deck.

"Only two dozen," Hammond told him, "but everything's secure. Shall I send boats to the shore to bring the others back?"

"Aye," Drake said. "Send the small rowboat with a single oarsman. He's to tell Mr. Ashley to send the pinnace back, with another dozen men aboard. Tell him to bring Sir Humphrey Gilbert, and Doctor Muffet too, if he's willing. It's a polite invitation, mind—call it a tour of inspection. If they want to know where I've been, or how it comes about that I'm back on board the *Hind*, your man has no idea—do you understand?"

"He won't have to tell a lie," Hammond observed. "Will you tell me what's going on, captain?"

"Yes I will, Ned—but not right now. Have we taken enough supplies on board to offer hospitality to our guest?"

Hammond ran his eyes over the Tahitian chief. "We've water, fruit, and a little bread that was baked ashore," he said.

"Good," Drake said. He raised his voice to say: "This man is our friend, and we must offer him the privileges of an honored guest."

The rowboat set off immediately, and the pinnace was not long in setting off on its return journey; Drake's men were experienced enough to keep it ever-ready to take to the water at a moment's notice. Even in the fading twilight, Drake needed no telescope to see that Sir Humphrey Gilbert and Thomas Muffet had both accepted his invitation with alacrity, but he did not know what to read into the fact that Muffet had decided to bring his daughter with him.

"Before our men come aboard," Drake whispered to Hammond, "I want them to be as sure as they can be that they're not harboring any spiders

about their person. I want the order given to everyone that any man who sees a spider on the ship from this moment on must kill it immediately, if he can."

Hammond looked at him curiously, but nodded his head to signify that these instructions would be followed exactly.

When Gilbert and Muffet came aboard, Drake went to greet them effusively—not forgetting Patience—and immediately asked whether Ruhapali was known to them.

"We know Ruhapali very well," Gilbert said, warily. "Was it to visit Ruhapali, then, that you left the compound, Captain Drake? I wish you had let us know that you were going, for we've been desperately anxious about you. We heard an explosion in the interior of the island, and there seem to be fires burning there."

"I've had quite an adventure," Drake said, equably. "Had I not known that I'm a madman, ever-prone to the most extraordinary delusions, I might be rather alarmed by what I've seen—but this is an island in the Pacific Ocean, after all, and not the interior of the moon or the hub of the Milky Way." He tried to measure the quality of the glance that Gilbert and Muffet exchanged, but it was not easy.

"We're very glad to find you safe, Sir Francis," Muffet said, "and in such good humor."

"Ruhapali and I need to talk to you below decks, in the cabin," Drake said. "Will you do me the courtesy of accompanying us?"

"Of course," said Muffet swiftly, almost as if he feared that Gilbert might raise some objection. The doctor immediately turned to Hammond and said: "May I entrust my daughter to your care, Mr. Hammond?"

"Aye, sir," Hammond answered.

The four men went below. As soon as a candle had been lit to illuminate the cabin and the door had been shut behind them, Drake said: "As you must have guessed, gentlemen, the islanders have attacked Raleigh's valley. Raleigh was struck in the torso by a spear, and may have been killed. The tribesmen are determined to destroy the creatures Raleigh calls celestial spiders and the other creatures they have transformed. Ruhapali offers us the chance to depart in safety, but he refuses to answer for our safety if we will not go. Given what I've seen today, I can understand his fears and his determination, and I'm half-inclined to accept his offer—but I told him that I must hear your side of the story first. What's your opinion, Sir Humphrey?"

Gilbert was evidently ready to reply, but he did not get the chance. "This is absurd," Muffet said, pre-emptively. "Ruhapali, you are making a terrible mistake. We've relied on your own people to persuade you of the wisdom and virtue of our scheme, but they've evidently failed. You must listen to us now, and stop your assault on the valley as soon as you can. You must allow us time to complete our work, so that its benefits will become fully manifest."

"You must go," Ruhapali replied, adamantly.

"Perhaps, Dr. Muffet," Drake said, smoothly, "we might be better placed to settle the matter if you would explain to us exactly what the purpose of your work is. I suppose that appearances might be deceptive, but I've

seen men transformed by spider-bites, who lie down to let monstrous parasites suck their blood and carry it away into a spider's-nest the size of a town, apparently at the command and behest of invaders from another world—and it seems to me that Ruhapali and his people have been exceedingly patient in waiting so long to take up their arms. Raleigh admitted to me that you and he dared not begin this work in England, and I'm inclined to agree with him that it would have been direly dangerous to do so."

"Superstition is a difficult enemy to fight," Muffet said, "Whether one encounters it in the Church, the Royal College of Physicians or the prejudices of ignorant men. You've found that yourself, I think, in trying to persuade your fellow Englishmen that what you discovered in the moon and beyond is real."

Drake did not want to waste time pointing out that he would have found that task far easier had Tom Digges or Walter Raleigh confirmed his story. "Be specific, doctor," he said, "and be brief—we have no time for a long discourse."

"Very well," Muffet said. "I doubt that you're acquainted with the principles of medicine, but you've probably heard mention of four bodily humours analogous to the four elements of inanimate matter, which must be kept in balance if the body is to remain healthy. I'll not attempt to describe all the complications introduced into that fundamental system as a result of the New Learning, hoping that it will suffice to say that there are at least as many subsidiary substances making up the components of living bodies as there are different kinds of solids, liquids, and essences, and that their various malfunctions defy easy appeasement by the remedies contained in herbals or those at the disposal of Galenist or Paracelsian physicians. We have but few defenses against sickness and injury, Captain, and they're by no means reliable."

"As I explained to you last night, spiders are unlike most other creatures in consuming food exclusively in liquid form. Even earthly spiders, which are exceedingly primitive, have developed complex methods of immobilizing their prey and transforming the flesh they will consume into liquid form. On worlds in which spiders, rather than insects and molluscs, have acquired intelligence and have become dominant species, they've become masters of the alchemy of flesh, whose secretions accomplish far more than mere liquefaction. The most advanced have become experts in induced transmutation, remolding other species internally and externally to their own designs. Our own alchemists have long searched for the elixir of life as well as the secret of transmuting base metals into gold and silver, but they've made even less progress in the former quest than the latter. The celestial spiders have achieved far more."

"The insects and molluscs that constitute the vast majority of intelligent species within the sidereal system do not like spiders, because they consider them dangerous predators, but that is because the spiders native to their own worlds are as primitive as the spiders of ours. In a more general sense, too, the masters of the galaxy have inherited the mentality of prey species and cannot understand the true logic of predation as a way of life. Humans, being omnivores who owe our own intelligence, cul-

ture, and civilization to hunting and animal husbandry, *can* understand, if we will only make the effort to overcome our silly prejudice. That's why we're natural allies of the celestial spiders, and why they're prepared to optimize us as a sibling species rather than a subject one.

"We humans have been alchemists of the flesh ourselves, in transforming all the species on which we depend: the livestock we keep to supply us with meat, milk, and eggs, the horses we use for transportation on land, and the dogs we employ in hunting. We change them to the best of our ability, tailoring them to our needs, optimizing them for the production of those qualities we desire in them—but we can only do so indirectly, by selective breeding. The celestial spiders are cleverer by far, employing all manner of elixirs that work directly upon the flesh of other species. They've used their intelligence very wisely in the investigation and deployment of their intrinsic abilities in this regard, and have become great experts in the calculated modification of their various domestic stocks—but they've not been content with that, either in their own worlds or in others they've found and visited.

"Where intelligence has emerged spontaneously among spider species, those species have never been content to remain alone; they've always elected to optimize intelligence in brethren species. Nor have they usually been content to restrict that privilege to other arachnids; they've been curious enough to offer the gifts of sentience, speech, and culture to species of very different kinds, including insects and molluscs. Indeed, many spiders believe that the species currently making up the dominant culture of the galaxy must have originated from spider alchemy, and then turned ungratefully against their benefactors, wiping out their makers and attempting to hunt down and destroy similar species wherever they found them, extrapolating their fearful prey mentality.

"There is, as you say, no time for a long discourse, so I shall say only this: the celestial spiders are willing to be our friends and benefactors. They're willing to assist us in the development of cures for very many human diseases, and to help us become far more robust in resisting injury. They can help us live far longer than our traditional allotment of three-score years and ten, and they can give us the power to re-grow lost limbs and damaged organs. They cannot make us immortal, but they can make us a good deal less mortal than we are. They're eager to do this because they've not had the opportunity before to work with natural species of our kind—intelligent vertebrates, that is. They don't know of any world in which spiders have contrived to induce intelligence in vertebrate species, but those that have developed naturally on Earth have far greater natural potential by virtue of their unusual size.

"With the spiders' assistance, therefore, humankind can take a great leap forward, benefiting from a process of perfection that might require thousands of years if we had to develop our own knowledge of the alchemy of the flesh by trial and error—assuming that we'd be let alone in the meantime by the great fleshcores and their multitudinous subject species. In sum, we *need* the celestial spiders, and have a great deal to gain from association with them—if we can only suppress and master our stupid instincts."

Drake had glanced repeatedly at both Ruhapali and Gilbert to see what effect Muffet's explanatory speech was having on them. Ruhapali, apparently, had not been able to comprehend more than a fraction of it, and seemed utterly unmoved in his determination to remove all alien presences from Tahiti, in order that his people might revert to the untroubled existence they had previously enjoyed. Gilbert must have heard similar speeches many times over, with appropriate elaborations, and presumably understood the arguments better than Drake did, but he seemed distinctly unhappy. It was to him that Drake turned now.

"What's your opinion, Sir Humphrey?" Drake asked.

"If I'd been told all this before I set sail from Southampton," Gilbert said, bluntly, "I would not have left England. I've been strongly tempted to return more than once, but have been torn by conflicting responsibilities. Lately, I've been reluctant to leave because it would have meant abandoning Dr. Muffet and his daughter to a dangerous situation—but now that the situation has become impossible, I wonder whether my duty might be to save them, and compel them to come away. On the other hand, I cannot believe that my men will consent to bring the results of the doctor's experiments in transmutation with us—except, perhaps, for the clever birds—and I might face a mutiny merely by virtue of trying to save the doctor and Patience."

"I can understand all that, Sir Humphrey," Drake said. "But what do you think of the merits of Doctor Muffet's scheme itself?"

"I no longer know what to think," Gilbert admitted. "For a time, it seemed that the potential reward might outweigh any risk, but recent reports we have had from the island's interior have made me wonder whether the real intention of these celestial visitors might be to establish a spider empire on Earth, reducing humankind to the status of mere cattle. If that is their plan, there might only be a narrow interval in which it can be nipped in the bud."

"Nonsense!" said Muffet. "You're allowing unreasoning revulsion to overrule the judgment of reason."

"Even if Sir Humphrey's fears could be set aside," Drake said, pensively, "and everything you said were actually true, rather than the result of these celestial spiders playing you and Raleigh for fools, there's another danger we shouldn't discount."

"What's that?" Muffet demanded.

"The danger that the great empire whose shores extend even to the interior of our planet's moon might not take kindly to an alliance between two kinds of creatures they dislike. So far as I know, no man in England knows that you are here or what you are doing—and that ignorance will presumably persist until some of us return—but that doesn't mean that your work is secret from the folk that Raleigh and I met when we went voyaging in Master Dee's ethership."

"We can do nothing about that," Muffet retorted, "except make sure that, should the insect hordes decide that humankind is dangerous to them, we're as well able to defend ourselves as we can be. That's a further

reason to embrace alliance with the spiders, and welcome our own optimization. In any case, we're already committed. If Ruhapali thinks that he can destroy the celestial spiders, or even the Earthly creatures they've so far transformed, he's mistaken. If he refuses to abandon this war he's begun, his forces will be defeated. He should make a treaty with us now, else things will go very badly indeed for his people."

"You will go," Ruhapali repeated, yet again. "You will give us guns. We will kill the spiders."

"Stay with us, Captain Drake," Muffet said. "Help us to defend the stockade and our work. If you'll agree to do that, I'm sure that Sir Humphrey will do likewise."

Gilbert was not inclined to confirm or deny that speculation. Instead, he said: "If you should decide to sail away from here, Sir Francis, I shall be happy to accompany you, with as many men as may care to come with me, to whatever destination you might have in mind."

Drake was not grateful for this statement, which seemed to place the entire burden of decision on his unready shoulders. He had no time to figure out a way out of the impasse, though, because Edward Hammond hammered on the cabin door just then and said: "You're needed on deck, Captain—there's movement on sea and shore alike."

Drake hurried from the cabin, assuming that the others would follow him. When he and Hammond arrived on the deck the mate pointed out to sea first. The night was clear, but the moonlight reflected from the sea was not very abundant. Even so, Drake could see that the waters around the *Golden Hind* were crowded with canoes—more likely hundreds than dozens. They were not, however, making any overtly hostile move toward the ship, and their paddlers seemed to be in a state of considerable confusion. There was a great deal of shouting, which seemed indicative of urgent alarm.

On the shoreward side, the horizon was red with fire and blotched with smoke, but lights of a different sort showed all along the coast, where there was more shouting. The settlement was more brightly lighted than the strands to either side of it, but did not seem quite so full of alarm.

Martin Lyle was in the rigging, with his eye glued to Drake's telescope. "The islanders aren't attacking the settlement, sir," he called down. "Indeed, I think they're begging to be let in for their own safety's sake—they're being attacked themselves. Everyone who can seems to have taken to the water, but there must be thousands of natives who can't."

Drake rounded on Muffet, who had come up behind him. "The celestial spiders have mounted their counter-offensive," he said. "You can make a better estimate of their resources than anyone else—can they be defeated?"

"It's not the visitors!" Muffet protested. "It's the earthly giants—they've not yet contrived to set aside their inconvenient instincts, any more than the islanders have. They're striking back reflexively. If you'll give the celestial spiders time enough, they'll bring the situation under control."

"We don't know for sure that they're still alive," Drake told him. "The attack was successful enough to wound Raleigh, at least, and it was begun by some kind of petard loaded with black powder. Mr. Hammond! Set men with muskets to port and starboard and have the artillerists stand

ready—but the musketeers are not to fire on the islanders unless they're attacked themselves. Lower the pinnace again and send it back to shore, ready to evacuate our remaining men—and Gilbert's too, if they haven't enough boats of their own."

"Wait!" cried Muffet. "I'll go back with them!"

"No," said Drake shortly. "Ruhapali! Can you judge from the shouting how things are with your own people?"

Ruhapali had already called down to the chiefs who were waiting for him in the canoe that had brought Drake back. "Spiders cannot swim," he replied, "but some got into boats—they caused much fear. Many people waded into shallow water—they are safe, for now. Sire Gilbert's men must open the gates of stockade to let my people in. They will fight spiders with your people."

"No!" Muffet cried. "They must not!"

Drake's opinion was that this was probably the most sensible option for the men within the stockade—but he knew how difficult it would be for the people currently locked inside to make the decision, given that some of the spiders would probably gain access along with the panicked islanders. He was sorely tempted to go ashore with the pinnace himself, but his own men formed a tiny minority of the company within the stockade, and he could not be sure that the others would take orders from him at present—or from anyone, including Sir Humphrey Gilbert.

There was a sudden clatter of wings and a large macaw hurtled out of the darkness to land on the arm that Thomas Muffet had hastily raised up.

"Raleigh's coming!" the bird squawked. "Stay calm! Raleigh's coming!"

"You heard that!" Muffet shouted—unnecessarily loudly, since Drake was still close at hand.

"It's too late!" Drake told him, in a much quieter voice. "There's no way this situation can be quickly repaired. If the spiders can be commanded to desist—which I doubt—that will only give the islanders the opportunity to renew their own assaults. If Raleigh and his precious celestial spiders have left the valley, they'll either seem that much more dangerous, or that much more vulnerable to attack—and I presume that they'll defend themselves if they *are* attacked." He raised his voice to shout to the boatswain in command of the pinnace: "Don't delay, Mr. Stephens! I want everyone back safe, as quickly as possible!"

Humphrey Gilbert had also taken matters into his own hands, and was shouting across the water to the watchmen aboard his own ships, instructing them to launch what boats they could to fetch men from the shore.

The sound of gunfire broke out ashore—a disordered crackling rather than disciplined volleys.

"What is it, Martin?" Drake called.

"The islanders have broken into the stockade, sir," the boy reported. "They weren't let in, and some of the defenders have fired on them. They're attacking the musketeers now, sir."

"Ruhapali!" Drake said. "You must stop your people fighting ours, if you can! We're not your enemy!"

Ruhapali shook his head, to indicate helplessness rather than refusal. Drake turned around, intending to go up into the rigging to take the tele-

scope from his kinsman and watch the disaster unfolding, but he stopped abruptly as he almost fell over Patience Muffet. She looked up at him, and said—in a voice pitched so softly that no one else could hear—"Please take me ashore, Captain. Hector, Achilles, and the others will need me."

Drake shook his head, to signify bewilderment as well as refusal. His head was aching, and exhaustion was beginning to inhibit his movements. Even so, he began to climb, going up far enough to be able to take the telescope from Martin's outstretched hand. He focused the instrument on the shore, but lights were going out now as the struggle within the stockade became evermore chaotic, and it was very difficult to make out any detail.

"How many cannon are manned and ready, Ned?" Drake demanded.

"Three port, three starboard, sir!" Hammond reported.

"Tell the for'ard gunner on the shoreward side to fire a shot into the shallows—but make sure it falls harmlessly, well clear of boats of any sort."

"Aye, sir!" the mate replied—and disappeared to make sure that the order was carried out to the letter. Drake hoped that the sound of the cannon firing might bring about a pause on shore, which would allow the defenders of the stockade and the islanders alike to realize that they had no quarrel with one another as urgent as their fear of the fire-maddened spiders.

When the cannon boomed, Drake saw through the spyglass that there was, indeed, a pause while everyone looked around—but the moment of stillness was short-lived. There were screams as well as shouts audible within the stockade now, and Drake guessed that the islanders' pursuers had followed them through the broken gate. He redirected the telescope toward the pinnacle, which had reached shore alongside the much smaller rowboat. He could only hope that his men would contrive to reach the vessels safely and begin the evacuation.

He heard the thud of a spear that hit the side of the vessel then, and the whistle of an arrow soaring over the deck. He groaned, knowing that the missiles must have been sent forth in blind panic rather than as aspects of an organized attack. He filled his lungs with air, ready to tell his men to desist from firing for a few moments longer, but it was already too late; a volley of shots returned the fire from the canoes, and there was nothing to be done thereafter but scramble down to the deck and fetch a weapon for himself, ready to repel boarders if the necessity arose. Ruha-pali was still on the deck, shouting orders in his own language, but it was impossible to tell whether the orders were having any effect.

"Raleigh's coming!" squawked the macaw, again. "All's well! Raleigh's coming!"

"He'll arrive too late," Drake said, wearily, fixing his eyes on Muffet rather than the bird. "I'll take him aboard if he can get here, but I won't take his accursed spiders—they must fend for themselves."

"They will, Captain," Muffet retorted. "You may be sure of that."

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Drake snatched a cutlass from one of his musketeers, but there were no more spears and arrows hurtling on to the deck now; whether that

was because of the volley of musketfire or Ruhapali's shouted orders he could not tell. He renewed his instructions to his own men, telling them to desist from any violence unless and until their lives were under threat. Then he put the telescope to his eye again, searching for the pinnacle. He saw that it was moving away from the shore again, having picked up a considerable number of passengers. The vessel was moving away from the remaining lights on shore into deep gloom, but the hectic movement of the shadows told him that something was badly wrong.

It seemed at first that the people on the boat must be fighting amongst themselves, and Drake wondered whether the islanders might be trying to seize the pinnacle for their own purposes—but then he realized that they were actually battling against two huge spiders that had managed to clamber aboard. Although three or four of the men had muskets, they had obviously discharged their rounds already and had not had an opportunity to reload, for they were using the guns as if they were clubs. Others were using the oars as staves to ward off the spiders—with the result that the pinnacle was drifting in the shallows rather than making significant headway.

Drake rounded on Ruhapali. "Can your canoe get me to that pinnacle? You may bring your fellow chiefs up here, if I can take their places with half a dozen men."

"No," the Tahitian said, immediately. "We will take you. You give us guns to fire."

It seemed to Drake to be a very bad time for haggling, but Ruhapali obviously felt that he had been cheated of his bargain before and was not about to let an opportunity to recover it pass him by. "Ned!" Drake called to Hammond, who had just reappeared on deck. "Bring me four loaded muskets, now!"

Hammond obeyed, but when he saw what Drake intended to do he begged to be allowed to go in his stead, or at least to accompany him. "You're exhausted, captain!" the mate added, by way of justification.

"No time to argue, Ned—and no room in the boat!" Drake replied, before collecting two of the guns and lowering himself over the side. Ruhapali followed, carrying two more.

The paddlers were ready, and the canoe shot away from the flank of the *Golden Hind*, heading straight for the pinnacle. There was no light aboard either boat, but the larger boat was still close enough to shore for them to obtain some benefit from the few lanterns still burning in the settlement.

The passengers on the pinnacle had cornered the two spiders at one end of the vessel, and were holding them back with the oars and the empty guns, but at least two sailors had fallen down, presumably bitten.

Drake moved into the prow of the canoe, ready to slash with the cutlass at the creatures' legs. He remembered what Raleigh had said about the difficulty of augmenting the load-bearing capacity of spiders' limbs, and thought that a likely way to immobilize them quickly. It might then be possible for the oars to be used as levers to tip them overboard. Ruhapali had other ideas, though. "Get down, Captain Drake!" the chieftain called—just in time, for his inexperienced gunners were far too eager to fire. Four shots went off almost simultaneously, but one islander was

knocked completely off balance by the recoil, only just managing to drop the gun into the boat before he toppled overboard.

One of the spiders flinched visibly, presumably having been hit, but the other bullets seemed to have missed their targets. The monster that had been hit had not been killed, and it turned to face the approaching canoe. Drake had to stand up again and carry out his plan, slashing wildly at the legs of both creatures.

Now that he was within touching distance Drake was able to appreciate the true enormity of their size and ugliness; they were, indeed, as large as sheep, and as shaggy too, but their shape was very different and there was something intrinsically horrifying about the way they moved on eight legs rather than four, with a curious fluid quality. Drake could barely make out the features of their horrid heads in the poor light, and could not make out the merest glint of an eye, but he felt an unexpected surge of revulsion that must have been born of pure imagination.

But this is the world as it is, he thought. The sky is full of stars invisible to the naked eye, and the countless stars have worlds where creatures like these think, feel, and scheme like Earthly men. Whatever happens here, on this remote island, our entire world is caught in their web, helplessly.

The injured spider lunged at him as he struck out, and when the two vessels scraped sides it contrived to scramble from the pinnacle into the canoe, where it fought for balance. Once it had found its footing, the monster would surely have hurled itself upon its attacker—but the pause was just long enough to allow Drake to slash cruelly at two of its legs, cutting them simultaneously, with enough force to break them both. A third leg must already have been injured, for the spider now found itself quite unable to follow through with its attack. While it floundered on the floor of the canoe, Drake thrust again with his blade, and then again, making sure that the monster was dead.

He felt a surge of triumph then, which overwhelmed the residual effects of his earlier frisson of terror.

In the meantime, the islanders had pulled their fellow out of the water, and the oarsmen in the pinnacle had managed to tip the second arachnid invader—which was also badly wounded by now—into the seething wake of the lighter vessel.

Drake turned to Ruhapali, intending to order him back to the *Golden Hind*, but he felt suddenly giddy, and his limbs seemed about to give out. In any case, Ruhapali was already giving orders in his own tongue. The canoe turned, and came alongside the pinnacle.

"Go with your own people," Ruhapali instructed Drake. "Go now!"

There was nothing to be gained by argument, and Drake now felt drained of every vestige of his strength. He allowed himself to be transferred to the pinnacle, leaving the four muskets behind.

Drake presumed that Ruhapali would find some black powder left behind in the settlement—but even if he did not, mere possession of the guns would increase the chieftain's status among his own people, and his determination to use the weapons against the celestial spiders. Drake knew that he was in no position to offer the Tahitian sound advice as to his future policy or strategy.

With the oarsmen now able to work unhindered, the pinnace sped back to the *Golden Hind* and unloaded its human cargo, including the two injured men. Drake found the strength to climb up to the deck, but Edward Hammond and Sir Humphrey Gilbert had to grab his arms and pull him over the rail. "Have we any men left ashore, Mr. Stephens?" Drake muttered to the boatswain.

"No sir," Stephens replied. "We have three of Gilbert's men aboard, but the rest of ours were taken aboard the rowboat." He pointed toward the shore, but Drake could not see the smaller vessel in the darkness.

"No more spears or arrows have been launched against us, sir," Hammond reported. "Your guest put an end to that, I think."

"Bring the pinnace aboard but keep the rowboat in the water attached by a painter, and its oarsmen ready," Drake ordered, hoarsely. "Keep an armed lookout—but no more shooting, unless it's necessary. We'll sit tight till dawn, and reappraise the situation when we've more light."

"May I borrow your rowboat to return to my own ship, Sir Francis, along with the men the pinnace brought?" Gilbert asked.

"Aye, Sir Humphrey, if you wish," Drake said, wearily, "but you might do better to come back when you've delivered your men and issued your orders. We'll need to decide what to do tomorrow, and it would be better if some of us, at least, were prepared to agree on a course of action."

Gilbert made a vague promise to return when he could, and lowered himself over the side. His men did not seem overly enthusiastic to leave the relative safety of the *Golden Hind*, but they complied with their master's orders.

"All's well!" proclaimed Agamemnon, who was now perched in the rigging. He was not alone; a dozen more birds had flown to join him, and the flock seemed as ready to wait out the night aboard as the ship's human crew.

"Let's hope so," Drake murmured, as he slumped against the mast. Hammond and Stephens had to pick him up, and help him below to his cabin. There they laid him on his bunk and promised that everything would be held secure until morning.

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Drake did not wake until some time after dawn, and would have slept longer had Martin Lyle not crept hesitantly into the cabin.

"What is it, Martin?" Drake demanded, knowing that the boy would not have ventured to disturb him unless he was needed.

"There's a native canoe off the port bow, sir—but the men in it are darker-skinned than the islanders. One of them speaks English, and says that you know him."

"Raleigh?" Drake asked, rubbing his eyes. "Get me some water, will you, Martin?"

"He didn't give his name, sir," Martin replied. He fetched a jug of water, from which Drake drank avidly.

"I'll be on deck directly," Drake said. "Ask our visitor to wait. Is Muffet awake?"

"No, sir. He and his daughter are asleep. The birds are still perched in the rigging, but Mr. Hammond ordered a search to be conducted for spiders as soon as it was light. None have been found, of any size." The boy left after making this report, and Drake followed him some five minutes later, having made what adjustments as he could to his appearance, so that he might better play the part of a gentleman and captain of an English ship.

The canoe carrying Walter Raleigh and five optimized islanders was idling in the water some ten or twelve yards from the *Hind's* bow. It was being watched by half a dozen of Drake's sailors, all armed with muskets, but there was no evident alarm on either side.

"I'm glad to see you well, Walter," Drake said, not having to raise his voice unduly to be heard. "I feared that you might have been killed by that spear."

Raleigh parted his shirt so that Drake could see the wound, which seemed half-healed already. "It would have killed a man like you, Francis," Raleigh said. "I'm glad you can see that it was only a minor inconvenience to a man like me. I'm sorry that we were interrupted—and sorrier still that Dr Muffet's work has been disrupted. That might cost England dear, if you and Gilbert are not inclined to stay here any longer."

"What do you expect of us, Walter?" Drake said, with more than a little bitterness. "I fought one of your giant spiders last night, at close quarters, and there can't be many of Gilbert's men who haven't seen them at their worst. If I ordered all Englishmen ashore, with abundant armaments, to support Ruhapali's campaign, they'd probably go—but I surely couldn't persuade them to stay on any other basis, and wouldn't want to. Captains, like kings, reign on sufferance."

"If we'd only had time," Raleigh complained, "Muffet and I could have helped you see reason. You, of all people, should understand the necessity of what we're doing."

"If the only way for humankind to escape being held in a menagerie by a legion of giant ants and slugs is to submit to transfiguration and be held in thrall by arachnid alchemists," Drake said, "I think I'd rather choose between the Devil and the deep blue sea."

"John Dee will understand," Raleigh said. "He knows more of alchemy than any man in England."

"If I ever see him again, I'll tell him what I've seen," Drake said, glad to find a concession he could make without effort. "I'll be exceedingly careful in telling anyone else, although I can't speak for others in that regard."

"You'd do well to stay here with us, Francis," Raleigh said. "If your crewmen won't, that's their affair—but you can get down into the canoe now, along with Muffet and Patience. Were you to call for volunteers to accompany you, I dare say that you might find a few."

"I couldn't do that even if I wanted to, Walter," Drake told him. "My first duty is to my ship and my men. I have to see them safely home, if I can, and to find them a better reward for their long expedition than I've so far contrived to do—something more easily tradable than potions distilled from spider venom."

"Can you really intend to return to South America and raid Spanish ships and settlements, after what you've discovered here?" Raleigh demanded.

"It's a trade I know," Drake told him. "But I also know that there's an Austral continent west of here, with two large islands in between, set some way to the south. Were I to go that way, I could sail around the world before going home, as Magellan's crew claimed to have done following his death."

"That's a pity," Raleigh said. "Will you fetch Muffet and Patience, then? I'm sure they'll be anxious to return to shore."

"Is it safe for them to do so?" Drake asked.

"Ruhapali's people are counting the cost of their adventure at present," Raleigh told him. "If they're wise, they won't attempt to renew their assault—but if not, we can defend ourselves. Muffet and Patience will be far safer here than they would be aboard your ship, whether you decide to sail east or west—and the same goes for you. Shall I gather supplies for you, and make sure you're well-provisioned before you sail?"

"That's very kind, Walter," Drake said, "but there are other islands in the cluster, where we can make our own arrangements to take on food and water."

"Do you suppose that we'd sneak cargo aboard that you'd rather not carry, under cover of supplying food and water? You mistake us, Francis—we're honest dealers. We mean you no harm, and wouldn't seek to use you unawares."

What Drake actually thought was that if the celestial spiders did want to use the English ships to transport any of their produce, just as they had earlier used Master Dee's ethership, they had had plenty of opportunity already to secrete their tiny agents in Gilbert's vessels. "I trust your word, Walter," was what he said aloud, "but I don't want to expose you to any risk. I suspect that Ruhapali's far from finished, as yet—and you might find him a more difficult opponent than you imagine."

"Within a month he'll be our staunchest ally," Raleigh said, confidently, "and within ten years—twenty, at most—Tahiti will be a nation to compare with any in Europe, sending diplomats to China and the Americas."

Drake looked around then, as Thomas Muffet and his daughter came on to the deck.

"Thank you for hearing me out last night, Captain," Muffet said, "and for keeping us safe aboard your vessel during the unpleasantness. I doubt that I'll be able to return to my laboratory for a while, but I can do my work in the interior."

"And will your daughter be safe there?" Drake asked, bluntly. "Are you really prepared to take her into the spider city?"

"Of course," Muffet said. "She has no fear of spiders."

Drake looked down at the little girl, who was standing quite calmly behind her father, living up to her name. He remembered what Muffet had said about the celestial spiders' ability to bring about internal as well as external transmutations.

"Bring the canoe alongside, Walter," Drake said, calmly. "You may take your passengers aboard. Your other friends will fly, I suppose." He glanced upward as he spoke to where Agamemnon was perched, surrounded by two dozen fellows.

"Would you like a parrot as a gift?" Muffet asked. "Tame ones that can mimic human voices are quite popular with sailors, I understand."

"No, thank you," Drake said. "I'm sure your birds would be much happier at home than they would be aboard ship. We wouldn't find it easy to care for them during long periods at sea."

Muffet made certain that Patience was safe as she clambered over the rail and began to descend the rope ladder to Raleigh's canoe, but he turned to face Drake again before following her.

"Perhaps we'll meet again, Captain," he said, "in England if not in Tahiti. I wish you felt able to stay longer—I'm sure you could be persuaded that our mission here is in the best interests of England, and of humankind."

Drake felt sure that he could be persuaded, too, if he were to give the celestial spiders the opportunity—but it was the means they might use to persuade him that he feared. Muffet and Raleigh seemed far too sure of themselves for him to believe that they were guided by mere reason—and Patience was positively uncanny. On the other hand, he had no firm grounds for deciding that they were other than human, or direly dangerous. If they were, then it was at least possible, if not likely, that there were others of their kind among Gilbert's men.

"I discovered three years ago, Dr. Muffet," Drake said, "that the world in which we find ourselves is very far from what our forefathers believed it to be. I can only hope that John Field was wrong in his interpretation of it, and that you and Walter might be right—but I'm beginning to see, now, why Tom Digges might be more content than any of us, in being able to believe that it was all a silly dream. Perhaps it was, after all, an angel that accompanied him into a world of multifarious demonkinds."

"There's no security in illusion, Francis," Raleigh said, from the canoe. "We must accept the limitless universe as we find it, and make what alliances we can."

"We're your friends," Muffet added, as he climbed down to join his companions. "We always shall be, no matter what you fear or believe."

"And I'm yours," Drake assured them.

He watched the canoe make its way back to the headland east of the harbor. There were other canoes visible on the water, further out to sea, but none made any attempt to intercept it.

Martin Lyle brought the telescope forward, and Drake turned it on the settlement. It seemed crowded with islanders, busy making their own arrangements to settle there.

"What shall we do, Captain?" Martin asked.

"We'll sail west," Drake said. "We'll reprovision from other islands in the cluster, then head for the two larger ones that lie south-east of the Austral continent. Then we'll investigate the continent itself. We'll collect what we can to carry home to England, but we'll be sure to take as much information as we can gather about the remote reaches of the world."

"They won't believe us in England, sir," the boy said. "There are too many travelers' tales already about giant spiders and clever birds. They'll think us liars."

"Aye," said Drake. "But not for long, I suspect. One way or another, the people of England will see the Age of Miracles reborn—and we can only hope that they won't find it unbearable as an era in which to live and dream." ○

Introduction

Truly, the small or alternative presses are now an indispensable part of the genre scene, producing such a wide array of fine titles that envisioning our literature without them would be tantamount to erasing a good portion of the best work being done. Here's a smattering of what's new and worthy of your attention.

Graphical Goodness

I hesitated to include this first item, only because its publisher, First Second, is a boutique imprint of a larger firm, Holtzbrinck. But if true editorial independence is maintained, then who's to say that this particular business model of small house sheltering within a larger one cannot still lead to a feisty underdog status? And also, I just wanted a chance to rave about the book.

A.L.I.E.E.N. (trade paperback, \$12.95, unpaginated, ISBN 1-59643-095-8) is by Lewis Trondheim, whose *Dungeon* series I've earlier praised (and do so again just ahead!) as witty sword-and-sorcery satire. But this volume, which pretends to be an extraterrestrial artifact discovered by the author, is another species of fun entirely. The nearest comparison I can make is to the work of Jim Woodring: exotic, macabre, mysterious, disturbing, otherworldly.

On some nameless far-off planet, a plethora of bizarre creatures go through seven wordless stories depicting their outré daily behaviors.

Although there are happy moments, most of the action ultimately involves catastrophe of some kind, personal or societal: killings, blindings, heart-break, prejudice, and the drowning of a city in a literal flood of shit. Now, before you get the idea that this book is some morbid downer, allow me to state that nothing could be further from the facts. Trondheim's black humor and his jolly, colorful creatures (these pages look like outtakes from the Beatles' *Yellow Submarine* [1968] or the French film *Fantastic Planet* [1973]) will have you chortling amid your pity. The portrayal of inexplicable but consistent alien dynamics (all the stories eventually tie together as well) lends a sense of uplifting and affirming fatefulness to this mordant cosmicomic.

Back in Trondheim's *Dungeon* series, co-created with Joann Sfar, we jump ahead from the heyday of that sword-and-sorcery world to its decline. *Twilight: Volume 1: Dragon Cemetery* (NBM, trade paperback, \$14.95, 96 pages, ISBN 1-56163-460-3) finds Marvin, the heroic dragon of earlier tales, in his decrepitude, blind and ready to die. He sets out for the legendary cemetery of the title, but on the way to his desired quietus encounters a youthful rabbit warrior, slightly deranged by idealism and named after Marvin himself. Rabbit Marvin and Dragon Marvin face a series of assaults from the mysterious current master of the *Dungeon*, and eventually come face to face with what proves to be a familiar figure.

Trondheim and Sfar exhibit high glee and brio in this series, and they

are not afraid of large transfigurative moments that are antithetical to stale, status-quo-maintaining comic books. Readers will be continually surprised and delighted.

The back cover blurb for Stephen Notley's *Bob the Angry Flower: Dogkiller* (Tachyon, trade paperback, \$12.95, 152 pages, ISBN 1892381341) proclaims its similarities to *Zippy the Pinhead*, *The Boondocks*, and *The Simpsons*. I will heartily endorse those comparisons, and add a couple of my own. If you enjoy the manic surrealism of *Flaming Carrot* or the rude effrontery of *Aqua Teen Hunger Force*, then you'll surely grok and groove to Bob.

Bob is drawn as an ambulatory daisy. He is a pure force of id. He wants what he wants, when he wants it, and his appetites are mostly primal, for food or status or glorious destruction. Every single page holds a different adventure wherein Bob and his sidekicks take the piss out of all self-righteous morality, rationality, and conventionality. Often there are SF tropes, such as when Bob builds a quantum computer, or purchases a passel of slaves from an interstellar trader. But there are plenty of contemporary referents as well. Combined, the always shifting topics provide a great mix of topicality and timelessness.

Smack dab in the middle of this book is a twenty-seven-page wordless saga titled "Pure Action," wherein Bob performs convincing super-heroics in quest of a lost piece of fried chicken. This brilliantly anomalous bit is a bravura boast by Notley that you'll never pin him or Bob down.

Anyone fascinated by the uncanny photographs of J.K. Potter or Jan Saudek, or by the psychological horror of authors like Michael Blumlein or Thomas Ligotti will be likewise entranced by Chad Michael Ward's *Autopsytrotica* (NBM, trade paper,

\$17.95, 80 pages, ISBN 1-56163-462-X). Using a bevy of beautiful women, Ward manages to turn them, via props and digital manipulation and clever lighting, into a gallery of spooky archetypes. Horned, winged, fanged, entubated, chained, pierced, with large expanses of naked skin resembling baked soil or ravaged porcelain, these Suicide Girls are icons from deep layers of the male mind. Ward's text offers some self-reflective insights into his art, which certainly merits the term "haunting."

Writer Chris Blythe and artist Steve Parkhouse produce a very elegant and subtle ghost story in *Angel Fire* (NBM, trade paper, \$17.95, 112 pages, ISBN 0-9549944-0-X). John Dury is a low-level thug with some shreds of morality. His main anchor in his life of drugs and violence is his wife Tessa. But with her death he plunges into weird strata of unreality, abetted by the new drug named angelfire. His hegira through the uncanny culminates in a Scottish manor, where his life story will dovetail dangerously with that of an ancient monk.

Blythe manages to make Dury sympathetic and fascinating: a good thing, since he's "onstage" every minute. Parkhurst's art combines meticulous, sinuous realism with moments of explosive fantasy. Together, the two creators have produced something equal to the best classic episode of *Hellblazer* or *Hellboy*.

There are over one hundred and sixty full-color paintings in *Cover Story: The Art of John Picacio* (MonkeyBrain Books, hardcover, \$39.95, 200 pages, ISBN 1-932265-16-3), and every one of them is practically worth the price of admission solely on its own. But in addition, you get innumerable B&W sketches, Picacio's insightful commentary, and a full interview with the artist. I call this the best bargain in art books to come along in a while.

You've seen Picacio's art if you've so much as stuck your head in a bookstore over the past five years or so. He's provided cover images for everyone from Silverberg to Moorcock to Pohl, as well as a host of newer authors, such as Justina Robson and Dale Bailey. His covers all leap off the page with a bright palette, iconic tropes, and sophisticated compositions, often featuring layered planes of images. But he also does full-blown moments of frozen narrative, such as his cover for the first volume of the *Adventure* anthology (page 133). Some of his most striking work involves Cornell-style shadowboxes (one weighing forty-five pounds when completed!). In all cases, his art reflects immense thought, taste, and intelligence. He's able, as John Clute says in a blurb, not only to "illustrate" but to "illuminate" a work. This book, designed by Picacio himself, is a wonderful compendium that succeeds in illuminating a career that is barely begun but already rich with accomplishment.

Nonfiction Titles

I'm enjoying Don D'Ammassa's *Encyclopedia of Fantasy and Horror Fiction* (Facts On File, hardcover, \$65.00, 488 pages, ISBN 0-8160-6192-0) even more than I enjoyed the earlier companion volume, *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* (2005). That's simply because the new book contains more information that I didn't already know, and I'm always avid and grateful for knowledge. So far as issues of quality and comprehensiveness go, the pair are equal.

In this second volume D'Ammassa hits every possible camp of fantastical writing, from the subtleties of John Crowley to the blunt instruments of franchise fiction. As before, the entries range from authors to se-

ries to individual novels and stories, and D'Ammassa's generously catholic tastes ensure that you never know whether he'll choose to discuss high art (Disch's "Descending") or low-brow schlock (Stephen King's "The Raft"). He's fair yet opinionated in all cases. (Not to draw the wrath of King fans down on D'Ammassa: he likes "The Raft" as much as he likes Disch's piece.) When an entry here—on, say, Avram Davidson or Roger Zelazny—has an antecedent in the SF volume, the second entry is completely different and apposite to the new topic.

Together, these two one-man symposia form an invaluable map to the lands of imagination where we all really live.

In 1972 the world was first gifted with Philip José Farmer's *Tarzan Alive: A Definitive Biography of Lord Greystoke*. This genius work of amateur scholarship (by a writer fully the literary equal of Tarzan's creator) invested its wild-child subject with more mana than he already possessed, and also debuted Farmer's grand "Wold Newton" hypothesis that connected a myriad fictional heroes into one magnificent lineage. Now this landmark work resurfaces in a handsome new edition from University of Nebraska Press (trade paperback, \$19.95, 316 pages, ISBN 0-8032-6921-8), complete with introductory material and some additional essays by Farmer. (UNP has also brought back many Edgar Rice Burroughs titles in handsome complementary printings.) In this book, Farmer uses ERB's novels as primary sources in his reconstruction of Tarzan's life. Farmer recounts all the canonical milestones in Lord Greystoke's career simply and objectively, yet with a vividness that beckons almost as deeply as the originals. He uses cunning logic and secondary sources to bolster some of ERB's

wilder inventions, such as the lost city of Opar, though at other times, such as with the Pellucidar adventures, Farmer flatly declares that Burroughs just made everything up in a departure from sheer reportage.

By the last chapter, when Farmer envisions Tarzan erasing his own traces from the globe so as to go into a robust retirement, we have come to accept the eternal nature of this twentieth-century icon, thanks almost as much to Farmer's loving tribute as to ERB's powers of invention.

Wesleyan University Press continues to publish a fascinating range of critical texts, the latest of which is a volume that's half fiction, and could well have been discussed just as plausibly in the "Anthologies" section of this column. Edited by critic and novelist Justine Larbalestier, *Daughters of Earth: Feminist Science Fiction in the Twentieth Century* (trade paperback, \$24.95, 424 pages, ISBN 0-8195-6676-4) consists of eleven stories accompanied by eleven complementary essays. The stories are all gems, and the essays commensurately rich.

Larbalestier has chosen stories that manage to be generously representative of that hydra-headed entity known as "feminist SF" and packed with plenty of subtextual meaning for the critics to tease out; which are all excellent reading on the surface narrative level; and which are relatively overlooked in the canon. The fiction authors include Clare Winger Harris, Alice Eleanor Jones, Kate Wilhelm, James Tiptree, and Lisa Tuttle. The critics boast such well-known names as Lisa Yaszek, Andrea Hairston, L. Timmel Duchamp, and Brian Attebery.

Ranging in origin from 1927 to 2002, these fiction selections represent the evolution of the sub-genre, from surprisingly sophisticated beginnings in the pages of Hugo Gerns-

back's magazines to the latest from Ellen Datlow's lamented online zine, *SciFiction*. Along the way, historical context is provided by the critics, as well as intense personal reactions, clever unpackings, and the re-ignition of old controversies. (See Joan Haran's essay accompanying Pat Murphy's "Rachel in Love" for a keen dissection of how the cyberpunk movement failed to accommodate feminism.) The one-two punch of these remarkable stories and their very readable critical exegeses makes this anthology the first stop for any reader interested in how half the human race has contributed to our genre.

Novels and Novellas

I am about to do something cruel. I am about to review a rare book that will be almost impossible for readers to procure. But at the same time, my review will be a beneficial public service, alerting you to the existence of two marvelous stories that you will certainly want to look for in their other incarnations. But please don't hate me for owning a copy of this rarity, and please ignore my chortles of collectorish glee.

For the convention known as Capclave 2005—a gathering I did not actually enroll in—attendees received a gift: a chapbook published by WSFA Press in the Ace Double format, with striking covers by Carol Emshwiller, of all folks. This volume (unpriced, 56 pages, ISBN unavailable) contained two long stories by Howard Waldrop, than whom there is no writer more gifted: "The Horse of a Different Color (That You Rode In On)" and "The King of Where-I-Go." Only five hundred copies were produced. Thanks to Messrs. Waldrop himself, I have one, wittily inscribed.

These two stories are among Howard's best. "Horse" conflates an

authentic history of vaudeville with a Grail quest, while "King" mixes tidbits of Waldropian autobiography with time-travel riffs, in the manner of James Blaylock's "Thirteen Phantasms." Together, they provide a glorious ride through the unique mind of one of SF's finest writers.

Both stories later appeared on Ellen Datlow's *SciFiction*, and, for an indefinite time as of this writing, may still be viewed at those archives [<http://www.scifi.com/scifiction/archive.html>]. Both will certainly show up in various collections, including Howard's own. But the glory of reading them in their rarest, most perfect state can be obtained only in one way, by the fortunate few. So, get thee to eBay now!

Next in line are two novels of fantastical erotica—or erotic fantasy. Both are equally accomplished and arousing, although the tone of one is humorous and farcical, while the other is more tragic and weighty.

Frank Thorne is best known, perhaps, as the artist who most perfectly incarnated Robert E. Howard's Red Sonja in comic book form. But he's done much more than that, including inventing his own swordly and sorcerous female warrior, Ghita. Ghita's story has been chronicled previously in graphic novel form. But now comes a prequel to her adult exploits, a true novel. In *Nymph* (Fantagraphics Books, trade paper, \$12.95, 127 pages, ISBN 1-56097-767-1), which is "Book One of the Alizarrian Trilogy," Thorne tells the tale of the fifteen-year-old Ghita, an orphan discovered and adopted by a traveling troupe of sexual exhibitionists, X-rated vaudevillians. Our narrator is the troupe's sleight-of-hand magician and skit-writer, Fordel of Thhem. Through his extravagant account, full of Rabelaisian do-

ings, we learn not only of Ghita's early exploits, but also all about Fordel himself and the other colorful characters that flesh out the "Antediluvian World." There's plenty of bawdy riffs, but also some truly eerie supernatural moments, such as in the section titled "The Apparition," where Ghita and Fordel have to confront "an amorphous cathedral made of a silvery translucent material that undulated as it silently glided forward."

Thorne's low-minded yet ornate prose is replete with comical sex, dastardly and heroic doings, musings on life and clever portraiture of a world filled with lizardmen, elves, ogres, and other typical but freshly invoked trappings of Fantasyland. A lively blend of Beardsley, Cabell, Hecht, and Vance, his tale—prinked out with numerous sexy B&W drawings—provides tons of amusement. I now count myself one of Ghita's besotted admirers.

It's no surprise that Richard Calder's new book concerns sex, since that topic and erotic motifs form the core of his work. But while Calder has always found the carnal relations between men and women to be fraught with perversity and disaster and doom, he has also always affirmed the essential necessity and heroism of pair-bonding. His lovers might misunderstand each other and hurt each other and be fated by societal strictures to expire in a pyre of unfulfilled lust, but they usually always stick tight. It's been a redemptive grace note in all his books.

But not in *Babylon* (PS Publishing, hardcover, \$45.00, 248 pages, ISBN 1-904619-57-6). Here, the young women are without proper and commensurate swains. Their only sustaining bonds are quasi-lesbian ones more emotional than physical. When they do encounter

men whom they idealize and for whom they commit acts of betrayal, they are promptly betrayed in turn, going down to solo defeat. Consequently, this Calder outing features less hothouse panting and squirming and writhing than his other work, and more chill glacial stasis (literally, by book's end).

In an alternate Victorian London, there exist official gateways to a parallel dimension called Babylon. Here, in the distant past of this timeline, was founded a continent-spanning city-state dedicated to the worship of Ishtar and other goddesses. Babylon recruits its priestesses from the Shulamite classes of contemporary London. These women are born and bred to be temple whores. Our respectable teenaged heroine, Madeleine Fell, is not a Shulamite by genetics, but one in her soul. She aspires to nothing more than Babylonian wickedness. When recruitment for a new class of priestesses gets underway, she enrolls with her Shulamite friend, Cliticia Lipski. Soon they will find themselves transported across the dimensions, to a world where it is always mysterious night, under a full moon.

Calder's prose has been toned down from its usual baroque heights, since the tale is delivered first-person in Madeleine's voice. But there are still epic moments of uncanny beauty, such as when the girls first encounter the ruined neighborhoods of Babylon. Calder's standard operating procedure is the same as Mad-dy's, when she reveals that "immersion in morbid beauty was the only antidote to the terror of my doubts." By embracing and magnifying and extolling entropy and beautiful decay, Calder battles the existential horrors of life. We all go down to dust, but some of us do so in style.

Calder does not receive as much

attention as other card-carrying members of the New Weird. But he is certainly of their ilk, and a unique voice in that choir. Like outsider artist Henry Darger, he collages emblems of innocence into panoramas of artful authentic decadence.

It's been a drearish dog's age since last we saw a book by that wise magus A.A. Attanasio, so we should herald with a loud huzzah the arrival of *Killing with the Edge of the Moon* (Prime, hardcover, \$27.95, 153 pages, ISBN 0-8095-5679-9). Unlike some of his other more multiplex and baroquely ornate work, this new tale is straightforward and simply written—which is not to say it's devoid of poetry, wonder, or wisdom. Far from it. Due to its stripped-down nature, all these qualities shine through perhaps even more brightly.

A very, very old witch named Nedra Fell has managed to survive into modern times, thanks to certain arcane rituals. We witness her at book's opening staving off her long-delayed death for another seven years. She's persisting on the mortal plane, we eventually learn, to mentor her orphaned "granddaughter," Flannery Lake. But teenaged Flannery doesn't really place much stock in Nedra's Wiccan ways, and so is totally unprepared when a near-fatal accident sends her soul to the Otherworld, the home of the inhuman Theena Shee, and the dragon who haunts them. Flannery's only hope for resumption of a mortal life is her nerdy suitor, Chester Hubert. Dispatched to the Otherworld as a "fetch," Chet soon finds himself battling the Theena Shee and "a planetary monster as old as the earth itself."

Attanasio's flair for both character development and scintillating action, as well as his ability to conjure

up a sense of the numinous and ethereal, ensure that this tale always moves effortlessly toward its sly climax. Functioning both as a YA novel and a timelessly mature Yeatsian parable of love and sacrifice, this novel marks a welcome return from one of the field's best.

Single-author Collections

The implacably daft and creepily bizarre voice of William Browning Spencer has also been missing for too long from our virtual ears. Spencer has four prior books to his credit—*Maybe I'll Call Anna* (1990); *The Return of Count Electric and Other Stories* (1993); *Résumé With Monsters* (1995); and *Zod Wallop* (1995)—all of which are worth searching out in the marketplace of forgotten classics. Now comes his second story collection, *The Ocean and All Its Devices* (Subterranean Press, hardcover, \$40.00, 197 pages, ISBN 1-59606-047-6), which assembles nine heterogeneous pieces into a brilliant whole.

Every story herein has a deeply shivery creepy side, but most exhibit a dark humor as well. The title piece is pretty much the blackest, detailing the miserable bargain that grieving parents make with nature for the return of their daughter, and how that bargain eventually falls apart. Two stories—"Downloading Midnight" and "The Halfway House at the Heart of Darkness"—play with virtual reality in a cyberpunkish way, and seem the most anomalous in this context. "The Death of the Novel" charts the uncanny comeuppance that a philandering professor undergoes.

Sometimes Spencer can sound like Robert Sheckley, as in "The Oddskeeper's Daughter." At other times—"The Essayist in the Wilderness"—he recalls Clifford Simak conflated with James Blaylock. But

by the end of this spook-house ride through dioramas of armageddon-battling stage magicians, butlers who are a separate species of humanity, and children who straddle dimensions, you'll feel exhilarated as only Spencer can make you feel. Like Jeffrey Ford or Howard Waldrop (Spencer, also a Texas writer, expresses a kinship with the latter in his introduction), the author takes what would be commonplace fantasies in the hands of others and inverts them into something truly rare and marvelously his own.

NESFA Press sure knows how to treat an author royally. Ken MacLeod was guest of honor at Boskone 43 and was commemorated with a handsome hardcover assiduously collecting a bountiful variety of his writings. *Giant Lizards from Another Star* (\$25.00, 349 pages, ISBN 1-886778-62-0) offers a wealth of MacLeodiana to companion his fine novels. First up is a selection of his poetry, revealing that his skills extend quite nicely to verse. I particularly enjoyed "Goddess on Our Side," which relates mankind to nature and technology both. Following this section we get a generous selection of fiction including the short YA novel *Cydonia*, which has fun with virtual reality, and the novella *The Human Front*, an excellent alternate world tale. A handful of short stories rounds out this portion of the book.

But what really makes this volume shine for me is the non-fiction. MacLeod generously shares autobiographical musings and his thoughts on politics, a sphere of human activity to which he has famously given much consideration. (The title of this volume is Macleod's assessment of humanity's current crop of rapacious and brutal politicians.) And as a critic of SF he truly exhibits insight and ardor, examining the future of our genre in such stimulating pieces as

"Trends in Science Fiction" and "Does Science Fiction Have to be about the Present?" His explication of what makes SF at its best so alluring— "SF is not fundamentally about human-to-human or human-to-supernatural, but about human-to-nature . . ."—rings true to me. In fact, it could be the inspiration for a poem. . . .

If Ray Bradbury at his prime had been hired to script his own macabre version of *The Happy Hollisters* YA series of my youth, for a film to be directed by David Lynch, the results might dimly resemble in an inferior fashion the novella titled "Botch Town" which appears as the beating heart of Jeffrey Ford's fantabulous new collection, *The Empire of Ice Cream* (Golden Gryphon Press, hardcover, \$24.95, 319 pages, ISBN 1-930846-39-8)—and only here, since it's original to this volume. In this tale, three children growing up in the bygone era of Ford's own youth face not only a mysterious prowler who might be Death himself but also a plethora of lesser, "mundane" challenges that, due to Ford's magical paintbrush, emerge as utterly fantastical. The result is a sense of childhood as a realm of dark mysteries, both beautiful and tragic.

But every story in this essential collection conveys Ford's perception of how magic arises from the quotidian. Whether a mural in a shabby bar ("A Night in the Tropics"), a boring lecture in a civic center ("The Weight of Words"), or a leaky clamming boat in a storm ("The Trentino Kid") is the touchstone, Ford can evoke the transcendent out of the common soil of our existence. But even in those tales seemingly far removed from our familiar lands, the palpability of everyday accoutrements grounds the narratives. For instance, I can practically touch the giant empty skull of a slain god inside which

lives Charon, the mythic protagonist of "Boatman's Holiday."

Jonathan Carroll introduces this collection with typical grace and insight and appreciation. Good choice of fellow traveler. Indeed, I'd lump Ford in with Carroll, VanderMeer, Blaylock, Wolfe, Powers, Shepard, Waldrop, and Link as American Gods of Fantasy, a pantheon whose full significance we all won't fully appreciate for generations to come.

But, lucky us, we can read and enjoy Ford and his peers right now.

Golden Gryphon delivers a second stellar collection right behind Ford's, and its exact nature might surprise you. *Black Pockets and Other Dark Thoughts* (hardcover, \$24.95, 275 pages, ISBN 1-930846-40-1) is billed as George Zebrowski's first collection of horror stories, and so it is. Can this be true? asks the savvy reader familiar with Zebrowski's many fine accomplishments in the SF field, and his reputation as a cerebral spinner of hard-edged speculations. Why of course! answers the even-more-savvy reader who realizes that Zebrowski has also been perpetrating spooky stories that trade on mankind's deepest fears, horrors, and terrors for his whole career. (The oldest tale herein hails from 1973; the newest is the title piece, conceived especially for this volume.) Zebrowski has long since proven himself adept at conjuring up tales that Robert Aickman or Thomas Ligotti would be proud of. But until their massed assemblage here, they've gone under-appreciated. No longer.

Zebrowski splits his eerie excursions into three realms: the personal, the political, and the metaphysical, leaping deeper into existential unease each time. Here's just a sampling from each category. In "Jumper," a woman's twisted psyche leads her to a gruesome death by teleportation. "The Soft Terrible Music" reads like

primo Zelazny as we follow the slow unveiling of one mind concealed inside another. And the title piece takes the cartoonish conceit of instant "holes to nowhere" and uses it as a meditation on revenge, hatred, friendship, and megalomania.

In his "Afterword," Zebrowski examines the exact nature of horror as a mode of narrative and realm of existence, and postulates that the genre is a tool for uncovering and refining exactly what it means to be a human adrift in the cosmos. This collection is a brilliant Baedeker to the blackest realms within us.

The Crucible of Power (Haffner Press, hardcover, \$40.00, 521 pages, ISBN 1-893887-22-7) is the fifth massive volume in the majestic project to reprint all the short fiction of Jack Williamson. His career kicked off famously in 1928 with publication of "The Metal Man," and by the time this volume opens, in 1938 (concluding with pieces from 1940), Williamson had published well over one million words of SF, fantasy, and horror. (And even the occasional capable mainstream story, as the opener here, "The Chivaree," shows us.) Take all the magazine-title adjectives of this era—astonishing, astounding, amazing, startling, and thrilling—and you will begin to have some suitable labels for his early accomplishments. Any slight imperfections of craft found in the early volumes have been burned away, and yet his zest for storytelling and his ideational fecundity is undiminished.

Three titanically scaled stories dominate this collection. The title piece chronicles the megalomania of Garth Hammond, intent on wresting power from the heart of the sun. "After World's End" follows Barry Horn on a million-year-voyage into the future of galactic empires. And

"The Fortress of Utopia" involves the remaking of Earth by a quartet of amoral visionaries in order to survive the passage of the planet through a deadly dark nebula. All three tales grip from the start and don't relinquish their hold till the end.

But then comes "Star Bright," a Thurberish story about a meek husband-father-wage slave who gets the power to create matter from nothing, thanks to a meteorite in the brain, and you realize that Williamson's talent spans the literary spectrum.

As always with Williamson, beautiful women lure and bedevil and ultimately rejuvenate his heroes. Is it too far-fetched an interpretation to identify these women with the shining body of the imaginative literature he adored and served?

Anthologies

Editors Bill Congreve and Michelle Marquardt have assembled a stellar collection with *The Year's Best Australian Science Fiction & Fantasy, Volume Two* (MirrorDanse Books, trade paper, AUS\$19.95, 285 pages, ISBN 0-9757736-1-5). This volume nicely supplements the USA domestic ones, and offers a tantalizing glimpse into the flourishing SF scene Down Under. The editors take a liberal view of precisely which high-quality works merit inclusion, based more on relevant author profiles than on venues of publication. Thus we get two entries from Datlow's *SciFiction* (Rjurik Davidson's "The Passing of the Minotaurs" and Lucy Sussex's "Matricide") as well as Greg Egan's "Riding the Crocodile" from Dozois's recent SFBC anthology I reviewed last time around. But there are also rarities from the US perspective, running the gamut from the experimen-

tal (Ben Peek's "Johnny Cash") to pastiche melodrama (Dirk Flint-hart's "The Red Priest's Homecoming"). Purchase this volume and you'll not only get hours of excellent entertainment, but also a fine appreciation of how simpatico our cousins are.

The stories in the Congreve-Marquardt collection are all quite cosmopolitan in voice and subject matter, exhibiting no particular national identity. Not so with the tales in *Mythspring* (Red Deer Press, trade paper, CDN\$22.95, 304 pages, ISBN 0-88995-340-6). Quite deliberately, editors Julie E. Czerneda and Genevieve Kierans have summoned over a dozen Canadian writers to supply stories inspired by "the lyrics and legends of Canada." What results is a stimulating journey through northern realms of the imagination.

The majority of the stories are pure fantasy. Ghosts figure quite often, as in Charles de Lint's "The Universal Soldier," Karina Summer-Smith's "Safe Passage," and Daniel Archambault's "The Ghost of Watson's Mill is Online." Vivid Canadian settings—the subway tunnels of Toronto in Lorne Kates's "Over Lunar White" and the logging town of Bean Creek in Lynda Williams's "The Harpy"—play an important part as well. Old legends in historical eras, such as that of the *loup-garou* in colonial Canada, arise ("Walking with Wolves," by Alison Baird). And new legends, such as Fiona Patton's Kuttnerish families with special talents ("Family Trees"), are created.

My two favorite stories stand out from the rest, however. James Alan Gardner's "All the Cool Monsters at Once" is a great comedic romp involving literally every legendary beast of the north, reminiscent of a Godzilla film. And Claude Lalumière's "This Is

the Ice Age" is arguably the only true SF story in the book, postulating a sudden shift in cosmic paradigms that brings a barely survivable apocalypse to our planet.

Latest in a welcome resurgence of Canadian fantastical literature, this volume is one to keep close by on cold nights when the Wendigo stalks.

Heather Shaw and Tim Pratt are another editorial duo who have recently produced a new issue of their sharp and elegant little magazine, *Flytrap*. Issue Number Five (Tropism Press, saddle-stapled, \$4.00, 48 pages, ISSN unavailable) contains four classy poems by Erin Donahoe, reviews by various hands, and a witty column on writing by Nick Marmatas. But the core of the issue, naturally, is the fiction, seven exemplary stories. "Cows, Water, Whiskey," by Haddayr Copley-Woods, consists of three archaic fables with eternally pointed barbs. Ruth Nestvold takes us on a humorous tour of "perfect" places with "Sailing to Utopia." A mourning teenager has a wild plan to contact his dead mom in Barth Anderson's "Teotihuacan," while another young woman named Fendie experiences a cyberpunkish future full of virtual music in David Ira Cleary's "Perfect Pitch." "Angel traps" are necessary in Nina Kiriki Hoffman's brief domestic fantasy, "I Can't Touch Them." Meghan McCarron examines the symbolism and ramifications of Armageddon in "The Apocalypse: A Pamphlet." And finally, a subtle magical realism involving circus elephants unfolds in Christopher Barzak's "Learning to Leave."

Pratt and Shaw have assembled a rich assortment of fiction here which eschews any party line or modish trends in favor of quality and variety. ○

SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

Take a break from cabin fever, and get out for a winter weekend of indoor fun. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For an explanation of con(vention)s, a sample of SF folksongs, info on fanzines and clubs, and how to get a later, longer list of cons, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 10 Hill #22-L, Newark NJ 07102. The hot line is (973) 242-5999. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con six months out. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, playing a musical keyboard.—Erwin S. Strauss

FEBRUARY 2007

8-11—CapriCon. For info, write: Box 2862, Chicago IL 60690. Or phone: (973) 242-5999 (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). (Web) capricon.org. (E-mail) info@capricon.org. Con will be held in: Arlington Heights IL (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Sheraton. Guests will include: Bujold, E. McKee, C. Faber. "A Celebration of High Fantasy".

9-11—Nullus Anxietas. ausdwcon.org. Carlton Crest Hotel, Melbourne. Terry Pratchett. Australian nat'l. Discworld con.

16-18—Farpoint, 11708 Troy Ct., Waldorf, MD 20601. farpoint.com. Marriott, Hunt Valley (Baltimore) MD. Media SF.

16-18—Boskone, Box 809, Framingham MA 01701. (617) 625-2311. boskone.org. Westin Waterfront, Boston MA. SF.

16-18—Life, the Universe, & Everything, 3146 JKHB, Provo UT 84602. ltue.byu.edu. BYU campus. SF & fantasy.

16-18—RadCon, 2527 W. Kennewick Ave. #162, Kennewick WA 99336. shawm-pack@yahoo.com. Pasco WA. SF con.

16-18—VisionCon, Box 1415, Springfield MO 65801. (417) 886-7219. visioncon.net. Media, gaming, SF and fantasy.

16-18—Gallifrey, Box 3021, North Hollywood CA 91609. gallifreyone.com. LAX Airport Marriott. Big Dr. Who con.

16-18—KatsuCon, Box 7064, Silver Spring MD 20907. katsucon.org. Omni Shoreham Hotel, Washington DC. Anime.

16-18—StellarCon. stellarcon.org. Radisson, High Point NC. SF and fantasy convention.

23-25—SheVaCon, Box 416, Verona VA 24482. shevacon.org. Roanoke VA. Science fiction and fantasy convention.

23-25—NonCon, c/o Box 3817, Vassar College, Poughkeepsie NY 12604. noncon.net. On campus. Gaming and SF.

MARCH 2007

2-4—Ad Astra, Box 7276, Toronto ON M5W 1X9. ad-astra.org. General SF and fantasy convention.

2-4—CoastCon, Box 1423, Biloxi MS 39533. (228) 435-5217. A general SF and fantasy convention.

2-4—MarsCon, Box 21213, Eagan MN 55121. marscon.org. Bloomington MN. Eleanor Amason, Don Davis, Gary Jones.

9-11—Potlatch, Box 5464, Portland OR 97228. (503) 283-0802. potlatch-sf.org. Written science fiction and fantasy.

14-18—Int'l Conf. on the Fantastic in the Arts. iafa.org. Wyndham, Ft. Lauderdale FL. Ryman. Academic conference.

16-18—LunaCon, Box 432, Bronx NY 10465. lunacon.org. Hilton, Rye NY (near New York City). General SF/fantasy con.

16-18—MillenniCon, 5818 Wilmington Pike #122, Centerville OH 45459. millennicon.org. Dayton OH area. SF/fantasy.

16-18—RevelCon, c/o Box 130602, Houston TX 77219. majorcrimes.freeservers.com/revelcon. Houston TX. 18+ only.

23-25—Icon, Box 550, Stony Brook NY 11790. iconsf.org. State University of New York at Stony Brook. SF/fantasy.

23-25—PortmeirCon, c/o 871 Clover Dr., N. Wales PA 19454. portmeiricon.com. Portmeirion UK. TV's "The Prisoner".

23-25—ChimaeraCon, 138 Av. Del Rey #G, San Antonio TX 78216. chimaeracon.com. Trishway Hall. Gaming & anime.

23-25—SakuraCon, 3702 South Fife, Suite K-2 #78, Tacoma WA 98409. sakuracon.org. Anime convention.

29-Apr. 1—World Horror Con. whc2007.org. Marriott, Toronto ON. Michael Marshall Smith, N. Kilpatrick, J. Picacio.

AUGUST 2007

2-5—Archon, Box 8387, St. Louis MO 63132. archonstdl.org. Collinsville IL. 2007 North American SF Convention. \$120.

30-Sep. 3—Nippon 2007, Box 314, Annapolis Jct. MD 20701. nippon2007.org. Yokohama Japan. WorldCon. \$180+.

AUGUST 2008

6-10—Dervention 3, Box 1349, Denver CO 80201. dervention3.org. Bujold, Whitmore, McCarthy. WorldCon. \$130.

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The immense April/May Double Issue will commemorate our thirtieth anniversary. It's packed to the waterline with fiction and retrospectives from some of the biggest names in the business. This unique issue will be treasured by collectors for years to come.

We feature *two* huge novellas by prominent authors in this issue jam-packed with best-selling, award-winning writers. **Lucius Shepard** returns with our lead story, a vivid, and violent novella about the criminal underworld of today's High Stakes Poker scene intersection with the spirit-haunted world of *voodoo*, and how some shady gamblers try to take advantage of "Dead Money." This one is as exciting, and as full of double-crosses and triple-crosses, as any *noir* thriller! **Allen M. Steele** takes us back to the newly settled frontier world of his popular Coyote novels for a tense journey of exploration into unraveled wilderness in company with a party of reluctant explorers who must guard against each other as well as the hostile environment, and who face their greatest challenge when they encounter the alien menace of "The River Horses." This is flat-out, fast-paced adventure writing at its best. But that's not even close to all we have in store for you in our special anniversary issue!

ALSO
IN
APRIL/MAY

One of the most distinguished writers in the entire history of the field, **Robert Silverberg**, shows us what it's like to have the disquieting job of "The Eater of Dreams"; **Lisa Goldstein** guides us to the quiet serenity of a library for an encounter that's anything *but*, as we meet "Lilyanna"; **Michael Swanwick** walks us down some mean streets in a murder investigation that leads to "A Small Room in Koboldtown"; **Nancy Kress** plays an unsettling "End Game"; **Karen Joy Fowler** guides us to a small town whose inhabitants have a rather odd slant on life, in "Always"; **Mike Resnick** experiences an unusual *déjà vu*, as he takes us through a bitter-sweet "Distant Replay"; **Gene Wolfe** gives us a nightmarish glimpse of life under "Green Glass"; **William Barton** shows us a hopefully prophetic preview of "The Rocket into Planetary Space"; **Jack McDevitt** explains how the debate over what happened on "The Fifth Day" can be of life-altering importance; and British writer **Liz Williams** keeps company with a lighthouse keeper dwelling next to a bitter winter sea who must brace herself to resist the assaults of the "Wolves of the Spirit."

EXCITING
FEATURES

Robert Silverberg takes a look back over "Thirty Years!" of *Asimov's*; all of *Asimov's* editors, past and present, share reminiscences about the magazine's history in a special Editorial; and **Norman Spinrad's** "On Books" column wonders "Whither the Hard Stuff?"; plus an array of letters, poems, and other features. Look for our April/May Special Thirtieth Anniversary Double Issue on sale on your newsstand on March 6, 2007. Or you can subscribe to *Asimov's*—either by mail, or online, by going to our website, www.asimovs.com!

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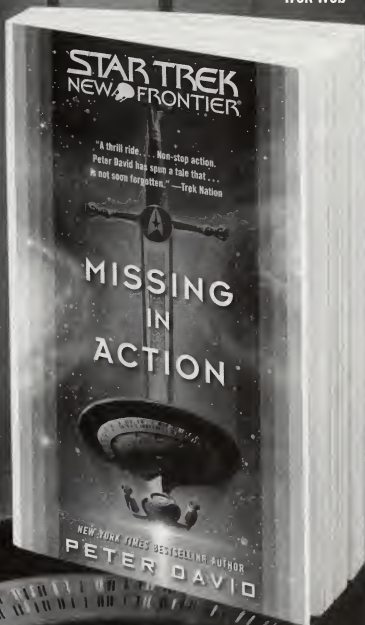
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